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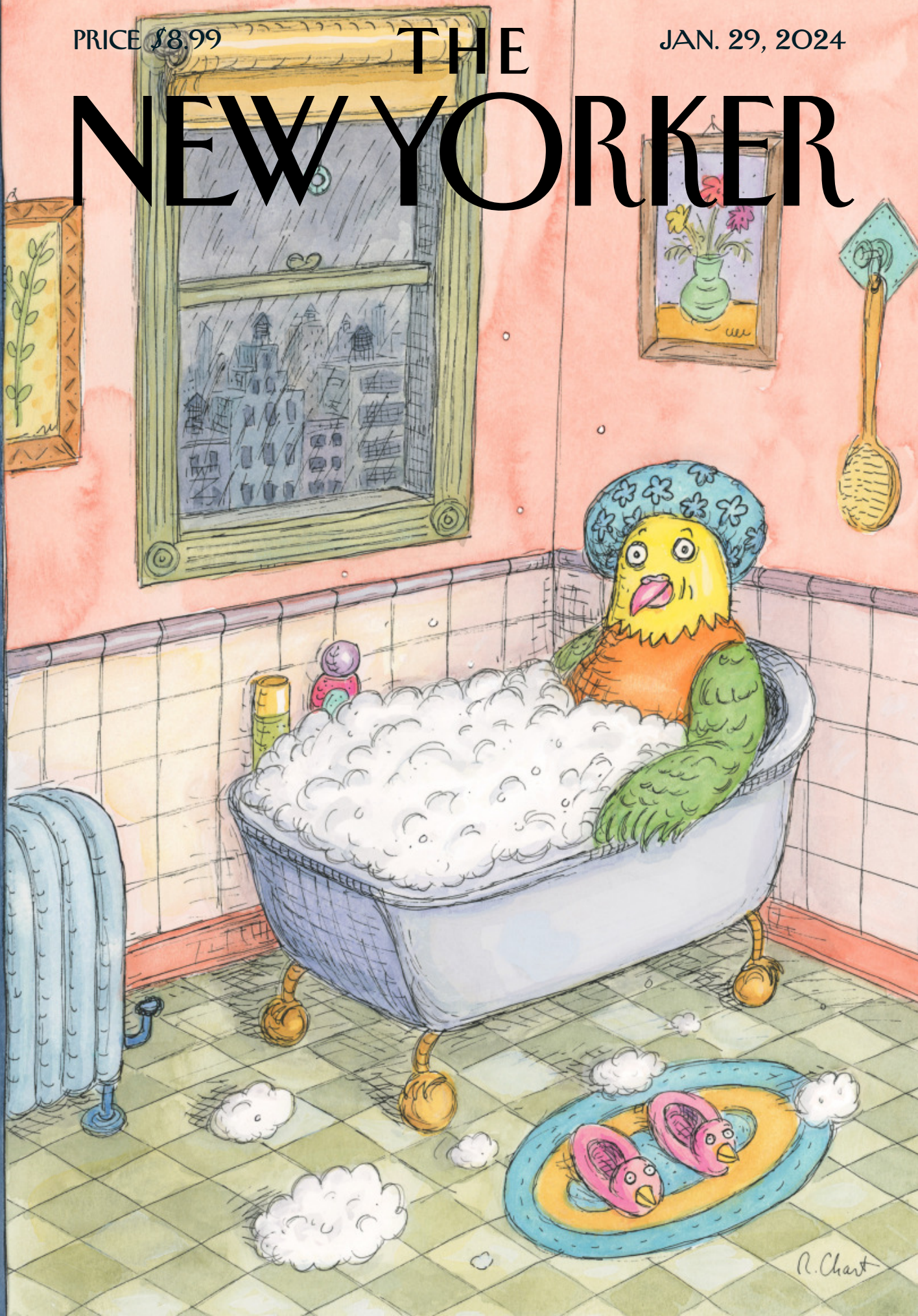

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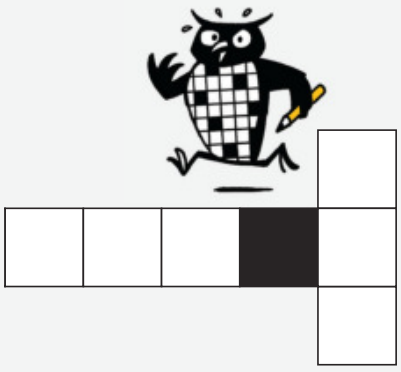

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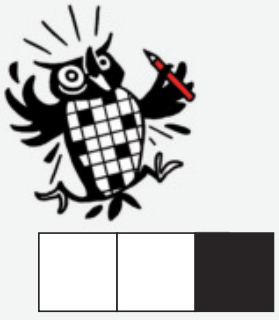

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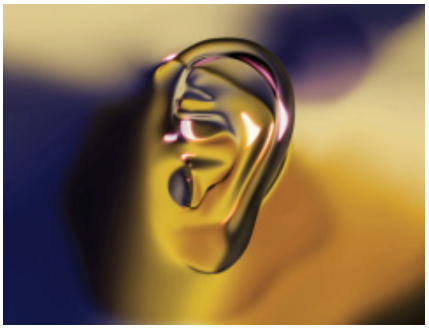

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

Rachael Bedard writes about a Yale-sponsored study of Long COVID which centers the experience of patients.

THE FRONT ROW

Richard Brody reveals his annual list of what the Oscar nominations should have been.

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LEFT: RAD MORA; RIGHT: COURTESY APPLE TV+

THE MAIL

MORE TO LOVE

I loved Jennifer Wilson's refreshingly generous overview of recent depictions of polyamory (Books, January 1st & 8th). As a psychotherapist who has long worked with couples exploring non-monogamy, I have found that one of the most helpful things about these depictions, even when they are flawed, is that they spur important conversations. All couples can benefit from reflecting together on what fidelity and commitment mean to them, so long as they do so in a curious, open-minded way—something that films, television shows, podcasts, and books can help them with. One recent film that might have this effect is "Maestro," Bradley Cooper's brilliant study of Leonard Bernstein's unconventional marriage, which portrays a deep, loving fidelity that is not measured by sexual exclusivity. What an exciting era we live in, with so many cultural offerings that explore creative ways we can love one another.
Wayne Scott
Portland, Ore.

I would like to clarify some points regarding Kerista, which Wilson refers to as a "free-love movement that grew to prominence in San Francisco in the sixties." Although various groups adopted the Kerista moniker in the fifties and sixties, the most successful and longest-lasting was the intentional community known as the Kerista Commune, which was founded in 1971. Wilson describes Jud Presmont as Kerista's "leader," but the commune was started by Presmont, the cartoonist Eve Furchgott, the poet Lynne Barnes, and me. It was a group accomplishment.

Wilson emphasizes Presmont's ideas about Western competition with the Soviets, implying that Kerista's spirit was ultimately capitalistic. Indeed, the commune ran a successful company—circa 1990, it was Apple Computer's twentieth-largest domestic retail distributor. But our greatest achievement, second only to the family structure we created, is that we practiced genuine economic equality. All of us enjoyed the same living standard regardless of who did what in the business.

Wilson ends her piece lamenting that "changing the world takes more than spreading the love; you have to spread the wealth, too." We attempted to create a movement in which the savings our life style generated funded social-justice and environmental projects. We weren't able to maintain our project for more than twenty years, but it is my deepest hope that others are inspired to build the movement that we couldn't.
Eva Konigsberg
Portland, Ore.

Wilson's piece is the first one I have come across to suggest that polyamory in America is as rigid an arrangement as the monogamy it purports to improve upon. Her friend's comment that poly people "just have a scheduling fetish" was only the first of several observations in her review that rang true for me.

I was reluctant to participate in polyamory. Then something old-fashioned happened: I fell in love. I began a relationship with a married man who also had another girlfriend. What I discovered then was that I had never felt true loneliness until I was added to the roster of a weekly calendar designed by the central couple. When I voiced my misgivings, my sweetheart, an otherwise lovely man, said, "It's not what you're saying that bothers me; it's your tone." I was startled silent by one of the most traditional male rebukes imaginable.

I have come to think that marriage, like life itself, is both short and long, often thrilling and sometimes tedious. But what richer, sexier, more creative challenge exists than that of devoting oneself to lifelong partnership with another person?
Jenny DeBell
Charlottesville, Va.

•

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GOINGS ON

JANUARY 24 – 30, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

The dancers of **Compagnie Hervé Koubi,** which is based in Calais, could be mistaken for gods. They glide, spin, toss one another in high arcs through the air, exhibiting an uncanny mastery of the body, and a gravitas that renders their movements into poetry. Unlike Koubi's previous works, his latest, "Sol Invictus," includes women. At times, these grave, heroic figures hold their fingers to their brows in a shape that suggests a crown of sun rays; perhaps the idea is that we each contain a god within. The piece is animated by the unfashionable and romantic notion that a common humanity unites us all.—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 23–28.)*

NATHALIE STERNALSKI

ABOUT TOWN

ROCK | For nearly four years, across four albums, the Asheville, N.C., rock band **Wednesday** has distilled shoegaze and alt-country into a little vortex. The writing of the singer and guitarist Karly Hartzman is full of haunted memory fragments of the American South, too damaged to be narratives but so evocative that they seem scenic, with many images of things coming to ruin. "We had to add it to the tab / To die we'd have to settle up," she sings on "Quarry," from the band's most recent album, the striking "Rat Saw God." Hartzman operates in tandem with three other guitarists—MJ Lenderman (lead), Xandy Chelmis (lap steel), and Ethan Baechtold (bass)—and the drummer Alan Miller to summon both noise and quiet, seeking escape from an endless malaise.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Steel; Jan. 25.)*

ART | The brilliant Belgian-born artist **Stéphane Mandelbaum,** who died in 1986, at the age of twenty-five, created some of the more complicated and awe-inspiring drawings of the twentieth century, in part because his bold, graphic work reflects so much of the horror of the times, with fervor, curiosity, and raw power. The grandson of Holocaust survivors, Mandelbaum always drew, and in his pictures of family members, Jews, and Nazi war criminals, one can see the influence of Ralph Gleason and Art Spiegelman, artists who, like Mandelbaum, tackled big questions about identity and survival but provided no answers: to each, history is open-ended, and life continues. Mandelbaum's strong hand and imagination are evident everywhere in these fifty-seven works, artfully arranged by the Drawing Center's director, Laura Hoptman. Part of the show's force derives from Mandelbaum's love of women; his depictions of various lovers are so visceral, you can taste his joy and amazement in every line.—*Hilton Als (The Drawing Center; through Feb. 18.)*

DANCE | **New York City Ballet** continues its march through its seventy-five-year history with a season that combines the old and the new. Two freshly minted works will be unveiled, one by a leading dancer in the company, Tiler Peck (Feb. 1), her first on her home turf, and the other by City Ballet's incoming artist-in-residence, Alexei Ratmansky (Feb. 15). Additional ballets in the season include one of the most striking premières of this century, Christopher Wheeldon's spare, mystery-filled "Polyphonia" (2001), and two Balanchine masterworks—the abstract "Four Temperaments" and the intimate and grand "Liebeslieder Walzer."—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Jan. 23-March 3.)*

OFF OFF BROADWAY | Over the past several years, the smooth, palpably clever performer Eric Berryman has devoted himself to a project of cultural retrieval. With the Wooster Group, using field recordings preserved on rare LPs, he reënacts songs and folk oratory from the African American past. Back in 2019, he put out "The B Side: Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons." Now, directed by Kate Valk, comes **"Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me,"** Berryman's performance of "toasts"—rhyming, rhythmic ballads, with assistance from the drummer Jharis Yokley, heralding the outsized deeds, often sexual, of trickster and badman heroes. Berryman acts as a kind of cool, genial radio DJ, but he's also the crooner who delivers the preacherly, proto-hip-hop goods. It's a variety show, a history lesson, and an almost spiritual reëmbodiment all at once.—*Vinson Cunningham (The Performing Garage; through Feb. 3.)*

ART | An antique marble fireplace, a model of a human intestine, a 1.5-ton boulder, park benches, rainbow fibreglass blobs, carpets coated in oozy tie-dye video projections: the contents of the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist's two-gallery exhibition, **"Prickling Goosebumps & a Humming Horizon,"** are as flashy and exhausting as a casino, though she's been considerate enough to include couches and pillows, too. Gallerygoers who come to take a load off may be surprised to find the eccentric objects curiously forgettable; what sticks with you instead is the mood of grim, compulsory whimsy. Hollywood movies, it's been said, are becoming more and more like theme-park rides. Perhaps avant-garde art is, too?—*Jackson Arn (Luhring Augustine through Feb. 24; Hauser & Wirth through April 13.)*

MOVIES | Mani Haghighi's new film, **"Subtraction"** (playing in the Iranian Film Festival New York), reinforces the notion that the highest form of surrealism is realism with a twist. It's centered on a young woman in Tehran, a driving instructor, who thinks that she sees her husband entering another woman's apartment. But he has an ironclad alibi, and when he investigates, he discovers that he and his wife are doubles of the other woman and her husband. Haghighi unfolds in meticulous detail the identical couples' differing circumstances (one couple has a child, more money, and legal trouble); the tense plot involves their risky and deceitful efforts to use their resemblances to solve their problems. By way of deft and seamless C.G.I., the doubles appear together, to jolting and outrageous effect; Haghighi's suave, taut images shudder with cosmic humor and seethe with danger.—*Richard Brody (Screening Jan. 26 at IFC Center.)*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Ilis
150 Green St., Brooklyn

Midway through a recent meal at Ilis, the new, dramatic tasting-menu restaurant run by the Danish chef Mads Refslund, I looked up from a piece of carmine-red bigeye-tuna loin, mirror-glazed in stone-fruit vinegar and only barely cooked atop a square of kombu, and wondered, for a moment, exactly where I was. I knew, of course, that I was in a cavernous former warehouse in Greenpoint, but there was something about the evening that was disorienting, that smacked of *elsewhere*.

The placelessness that suffuses Ilis is, I suspect, part of the design. Much has been made of Refslund's involvement with Noma, the high-concept Copenhagen restaurant that became famous for turning hyper-local ingredients into bite-size, highly specific documents of the natural world. There's a bit of Noma's DNA at Ilis, not just in the Scandinavian aesthetic but in the audacity of its creative ambition, its sense of cooking as a form of art—but where Noma was all about anchoring the ephemerality of food to concrete notions of place and time, Ilis seems to be committed, body and soul, to abstraction.

"Mads loves the idea of using part of an animal as the tool to eat it," a chef-cum-server said, as she laid down a preparation of giant whelk with chive oil and a buttery foam. It had been piped into the whelk's shell, and was presented with a spoon whose bowl was made from the creature's dried foot. Are there giant whelks swimming around New York? Is there something profound in making a whelk taste, quite pleasingly, like sour-cream-and-onion chips?

A meal at Ilis is remarkable, full of fantastical flourishes and clever manipulations, and some of the dishes I tried are among the most satisfying I've had in ages. That glazed bigeye tuna melted on the tongue into a glossy slick of seawater and fat and sweetness; a stern-looking dessert porridge made of rye and dark chocolate was extraordinarily subtle. Other dishes are less thrilling, though perhaps this is an unfortunate upshot of their exquisite context. Antelope tartare, intriguing in theory, tasted flat and underseasoned. A fluke ceviche, presented early in the meal, was overwhelmed by enormous hunks of citrus interleaved with the thinly sliced flesh.

I thought that I'd booked the shorter of Ilis's two tasting menus, but as the courses rolled in I started to doubt myself. I tried to count, but lost track somewhere around a dish of Brussels sprouts "on the cob" (spice-encrusted, fantastic; I ate them off the stalk with the intensity of a pig rooting for truffles). There was no printed menu to refer to, and the bill, when it came, was handwritten on a scrap of paper. But what's a few hundred dollars and a half-dozen courses between friends? Swirling in the vortex of Refslund's culinary vision, there is simply nothing to do but give in. *(Tasting menu $195–$295.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Michael Schulman shares his current obsessions.

1. One historic night in 1985, more than forty music superstars convened in a Hollywood recording studio to sing the anthem "We Are the World," to raise money for famine relief in Africa. Bao Nguyen's documentary **"The Greatest Night in Pop"** (arriving on Netflix on Jan. 29) retraces the evening's logistical nightmares and sonic magic, using extensive archival footage and new interviews with such luminaries as Bruce Springsteen, Cyndi Lauper, and Lionel Richie, who wrote the song with Michael Jackson.

2. The life of a drama critic isn't typically one of thrills and chills, but the *Times* journalist Alexis Soloski imagines otherwise in her noirish début novel, **"Here in the Dark."** Drawing on a real incident from Soloski's time at the *Village Voice*—a young man asked to interview her, then apparently went missing after their meeting—the book follows an icy, vodka-swilling theatre critic who gets entangled in a mystery. (The Broadway star Laura Benanti reads the audiobook.) Think "The Flight Attendant," with Sophocles jokes.

3. After releasing the demented Thanksgiving special "Our Home Out West," a parody of small-town melodrama, the impish comedic dynamo Cole Escola takes on the role they were born to play: Mary Todd Lincoln. In **"Oh, Mary!"** (starting Jan. 26, at the Lucille Lortel), Escola embodies the former First Lady—complete with gowns and histrionics—in the days leading up to the assassination of her husband (Conrad Ricamora), telling the tale "through the lens of an idiot."

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
TRIALS AND THE TRAIL

As a way of launching the race for the Republican Presidential nomination, the Iowa and New Hampshire contests offer a neat thematic juxtaposition: in the Midwest, candidates fight for the social-conservative vote; in New England, for the support of small-business owners. Last week, after winning the Iowa caucus by thirty points, Donald Trump complicated the story by ping-ponging between New Hampshire and a Manhattan courtroom, where a jury is considering the amount of damages he now owes E. Jean Carroll for defaming her by saying that she lied when she accused him of rape. "Here's my schedule for the next four or five days," Trump told a crowd in Atkinson, New Hampshire, on Tuesday evening. "I come here, I meet with great groups in New Hampshire. I then get on the plane late at night when it's snowing and freezing out—wonderful. And the pilot says, 'Sir, it's gonna be tough.' And I get there early in the morning, I go to a Biden witch hunt, then I come here in the afternoon." Trump's trials, in which he faces ninety-one felony counts, have often been described as a potential distraction for the candidate. But Trump, who complained in Atkinson that he has been indicted more times than Al Capone, did not sound distracted or gloomy about the prospect of spending that time in court. Quite the opposite.

Trump wasn't required to appear at the Carroll trial at all. But he found it politically advantageous to be there, not so much menacing the courtroom as Dennis-the-Menacing it. On Tuesday, when potential jurors were asked whether they believed that the 2020 election had been stolen, three raised their hands (none was selected), and Trump raised his hand, too. On Wednesday, Carroll's lawyer said that Trump was disrupting the proceedings by "muttering" loudly enough for jurors to hear him say that the trial was a "con job" and a "witch hunt." The judge threatened to throw him out. "I'd love that," Trump replied. But, as he has been pointing out on the campaign trail, the indictments and trials have had a way of strengthening his support among Republicans. Trump's first Presidential campaign, in 2016, was launched in an atmosphere of displacement and rage. This one is being conducted in a posture of relentless victimhood.

Maybe that's a more effective position than at first it sounds. One way to interpret it is that the trials have imposed a deadline and he is in a race to beat it:

to consolidate the support of the Party before his most serious cases get under way, so that he can campaign against the charges as partisan fictions. This may explain his curiously subdued performance after his win in Iowa, which derailed the campaign of Ron DeSantis, his only real challenger on the right. Speaking at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, Trump praised both DeSantis and Nikki Haley, and repeatedly urged the Party to "come together." In recent campaign appearances, Trump has tended to stand alone on the stage and deliver a harangue, but in Des Moines he was flanked by his sons Eric and Don, Jr., and devoted part of his meandering victory speech to the sports preferences and tall height of his youngest son, Barron. Donald Trump, political conciliator and family man? It would be a real turn. But organizing his campaign around the idea that the trials are a Democratic setup means that Trump has to get the whole Party behind him, even those members who have long found him immoral, vindictive, or extreme.

Trump isn't really running as a populist insurgent this time. He's acting like something closer to a conventional leader of the Republican Party—though it's a party, of course, that he has completely remade. His reëmergence as its front-runner in this election, after he tried to overturn the results of the last one, has required both capitulations within the Party (from Mitch McConnell's failure to push G.O.P. senators to convict Trump during his second impeachment trial to Marco Rubio's and Ted Cruz's endorsements, last week, of the candidate they once denounced) and mistakes made outside it. The Biden

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Justice Department's yearlong slow roll of its January 6th investigation, out of a "wariness to appear partisan," as the Washington *Post* put it, now looks a little naïve. The trouble for Biden isn't just that Trump remains the central figure in U.S. politics. It's also that, to some voters, Biden's inability to move his predecessor offstage just demonstrates the ineffectualness of his Administration.

Trump's unity stance may be superficial—not even a full day after his Iowa win, he was back to mocking DeSantis and Haley—but it seems that it can still have an effect. The religious conservatives who helped defeat him in Iowa in 2016 largely supported him this time; at Davos, mainstream business leaders including Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase, found ways to praise him. On Friday, Senator Tim Scott, who has been viewed as an approachable moderate, endorsed Trump over Haley, his fellow South Carolinian. Chris Christie was the last Republican contender to criticize Trump over January 6th, and the former President probably expects that, if he keeps attacking judges and prosecutors, and pushing grandiose claims of immunity (such as that, absent an impeachment conviction, he wouldn't be criminally liable even if, as President, he had ordered SEAL Team Six to assassinate a rival), most of the remaining holdouts in the Party will, if not support him, shuffle their feet and look the other way.

Is it clever, or deluded, for Trump to see his trials as a political opportunity? He has already been found liable for sexual abuse, in the Carroll case, and he still faces charges of financial fraud, taking documents marked classified from the White House and refusing to give them back, and conspiring to overturn a federal election—not exactly a winning roster. On the icy campaign trail this month, Trump's presence has been something short of overwhelming. His events are held mostly in hotel ballrooms and country clubs, rather than the arenas of yore; he says little that is new; the crowds tend to thin noticeably as he rambles on. They chuckle when he says "crooked Joe Biden," but there is nothing like the cascading chants of "Lock her up!" directed at Hillary Clinton in 2016. Even Trump's Iowa "landslide" consisted of just fifty-six thousand votes, and half of Republicans wanted someone else. Lately, Trump has been working into his stump speech an attack on Fani Willis, the Fulton County D.A., who indicted him for conspiring to pressure Georgia officials to invalidate his loss in the state in 2020—and whom one of his co-defendants has accused of an alleged conflict of interest. For Trump, the attraction of the trials, in an election characterized so far by general indifference, may be quite basic. They give him something to talk about.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

IF YOU BUILD IT
A SHUL IS A SHUL IS A SHUL

Recently, in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood, a ye-olde Tudor-style mansion at 770 Eastern Parkway made headlines when a group of young Hasidic men were filmed brawling with police after emerging, improbably, out of a homemade subterranean passageway in a basement shul. The *Times:* "ALTERCATION OVER SECRET SYNAGOGUE TUNNEL." The *Post:* "SUB*VEY!* CHA'BAD' BOYS SPARK HOLE-Y WAR BY DIGGING ILLEGAL TUNNEL UNDER BROOKLYN SYNAGOGUE." The tunnel in question, which is about the length of a bowling lane, became the subject of intense public interest, as the incident involved several Lubavitcher extremists, vile antisemitic conspiracy theories, and cops dropping Yiddish. The radicals who built it believed they were carrying out the wishes of the Moshiach—the Chabad-Lubavitch Messiah, the late Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who often spoke of his wish to expand the movement.

In fact, the Rebbe did expand—but mostly aboveground. In a move that has tickled architectural historians, he encouraged the construction of numerous replicas of 770 Eastern Parkway around the world, in Los Angeles, Aspen, Cleveland, Tacoma, Jerusalem, São Paulo, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Milan, Montreal, Melbourne, and Dharamkot, India, where it sits not too far from the Dalai Lama's temple. The distinctive façades have become a worldwide symbol of Hasidic Judaism. They also look as if Henry XIII could've lived there.

The building came into the Lubavitchers' hands in 1940. "The doctor who first owned the building had interesting taste," a Hasidic architect named Eli Meltzer said on a snowy afternoon last week, looking up at the shul. Meltzer had joined some rabbis for a history lesson about Lubavitcher H.Q. In the nineteen-thirties, the doctor, a Jew, commissioned the three-story, triple-gabled, neo-Gothic Tudor revival (other historians have argued that it's more neo-Jacobean) mansion from an architect named Edwin Kline. The style telegraphed Old World wealth, like a proto-McMansion. Kline also built a Tudor revival for Oscar Hammerstein, on Long Island. As the Jewish news outlet the Forward has chronicled, the doctor, who performed illegal abortions in the house, lost his medical license, bribed a judge, and went to prison for tax evasion. The mansion was repossessed by the bank, which sold it to the Rebbe's father-in-law, a rabbi who had just fled the Nazis in Poland and was looking for a headquarters for the Lubavitchers. He didn't buy the house for its old-timey details (stained-glass sailboats, inset quatrefoils, an oriel window, ornamented spandrels, rumors of a crucifix). The deciding factor? The Rebbe's father-in-law, who had been tortured by the Soviets, required an elevator, and the mansion had one.

770 Eastern Parkway

"This is the elevator!" Meltzer said, standing in 770's foyer, pointing to a wooden door next to the late Rebbe's office, which was locked. Meltzer wore a black kippah, black pants, black Sorel boots, and a green Gore-Tex jacket over a black blazer and a white shirt. After the father-in-law died, Meltzer explained, the Rebbe took over; until his death, in 1994, his mission was expansion—more worshippers, and more places to worship. That meant more iterations of the very *goyische* 770 Eastern Parkway. Each new temple is a near-copy of the original Crown Heights mansion: three gables, a central bay window, reddish brick.

Starting in 2004, the photographers Andrea Robbins and Max Becher spent a decade surveying them. "We photographed them up close, so that one could see what was carried over," Robbins said recently. In the Milan temple, the central oriel became a balcony; in Los Angeles, a sort of red brick mansion was built atop a parking garage. The 770 replica in Aspen, Colorado, looks more like a ski chalet than an English revival. "They're filled with compromise," Robbins said. "That's part of the spirit of putting one up." Meltzer, who designed a 770 in El Paso with an Alamo-style false façade, said, "*Every* detail must be preserved, but for any number of reasons they can't be—and, by divine providence, it ends up being something else."

Robbins and Becher, whose other projects include a study of Cracker Barrels, also photographed each replica from a distance. The red brick 770 in Jerusalem, stuck amid a hillside of white limestone houses, suggests "Where's Waldo?"; São Paulo's doll-house-style 770 is sandwiched between two modern high-rises. Like the Zabar's building, an incongruous half-timbered Tudor-style structure on upper Broadway, the architecture of the replicas feels out of place with their standing as Jewish landmarks. "To my mind, there's something a little Waspy about anything that's an English revival," Louis Loftus, who briefly researched the 770 replicas as an architectural-history Ph.D. student at Princeton, said last week.

Back at the Lubavitcher H.Q. in Crown Heights—the O.G. 770—Rabbi Chaim Halberstam, who wore a long gray beard and a longer black coat, showed off a photograph that he had taken in 1976—the shul, filled with thousands of elated worshippers. "Today, I don't think there's a building that would be able to contain everyone," he said. The rabbi laughed. "There's no place to go. That's why some kids started to dig!" Meltzer, the architect, said that he preferred new construction projects: "We like to build, man."

—Adam Iscoe

VISITING DIGNITARY
SKATER LOVE

A couple of diehard skaters were undeterred by the slushy weather in the Andy Kessler Skate Park, near the Henry Hudson Parkway. They weren't together, and each moved in his own loose orbit, trying different tricks and carving around puddles. One was a teenager dressed for the cold—beanie, parka, and pillowy snowboard gloves. The other, a lanky middle-aged man shivering in jeans and a hoodie, was Tony Hawk.

"My schedule's so jammed that I didn't want to waste time going back to the hotel for warmer clothes," Hawk said, rubbing his hands together. "That might've been a mistake." At fifty-five, Hawk is a philanthropist, an entrepreneur, the titular character in a billion-dollar video-game franchise, and the most iconic skateboarder ever to have lived. He'd flown in from California the night before and spent the morning at City Hall, lobbying for public skate parks. That evening, he was being honored at a gala, and he would fly home, to San Diego, the next day to record an episode of his podcast, "Hawk vs Wolf." This was his only window for skating.

"My first trip to the city was in the mid-eighties, on a Bones Brigade tour," he said. "Back then, there was nowhere to skate, so we just stopped at CBGB to buy T-shirts and got back on the road." He dropped into a half-pipe. "Everything's changed for the better," he said. "This city cares about skaters."

Hawk and his wife, Catherine, first visited New York together in 2010. They'd arrived late and headed straight for Blue Ribbon Brasserie. When they walked in, a diner in bottle-thick glasses slid back his chair to block their path. Hawk recognized the man immediately. "I turn to Catherine and go, 'That's Mark Mothersbaugh!'" he recalled. "And she looked at the others at his table and said, 'And *that's* Devo!'"

Last summer, Hawk's teen-age daughter attended theatre camp in the city, and the family rented a place on the Lower East Side. Hawk was also finishing what would become his farewell "video part," the skateboarding equivalent of a writer's final novel. The part, "Tapes You Leave Behind," required more than four years to complete—for one thing, Hawk took a hiatus from filming while he underwent two major surgeries. The first procedure occurred after he miscalculated his landing on an aerial and broke his femur—"I tried getting up, but my leg didn't come with me. It was pointing in the wrong direction." The second surgery was less than a year later, the consequence of returning to skating before his femur had healed. A documentary about his recovery is currently being shopped around Hollywood.

Tony Hawk

"After I'd recovered enough to be creative, I remembered I'd been working on a part," he said. "Once I committed to finishing, I realized it was going to be more difficult—and exhausting—than I'd ever imagined. I didn't set out for this to be my final project, but here we are.

"That term, 'video part,' used to make sense, by the way," Hawk said. "It was your three or four minutes in an hour-long video with other skaters. Full-length skate videos are a lost art form because of costs and logistics, so now the *part* is

the whole. Part of what, though? The Internet, I guess."

As a cold wind whooshed through the park, Hawk flowed from the half-pipe to the street section and back. He improvised routes in order to hit every obstacle, as if collecting tokens in a video game. Despite his injury, he looked ageless on his board. When he snapped a lofty ollie over an embankment, the teen-ager finally clocked who'd been skating with him; he started patting his pockets for his phone.

"I feel humbled and, I don't know, liberated?" Hawk said about skating after the release of "Tapes." "It doesn't feel like I have some herculean goal to reach every session. I used to get obsessed and, like, angry. I'd get this intense tunnel vision, and people have told me, after the fact, that I've made them uncomfortable when we skated together. Now it can kind of feel like I'm coasting, and I've never liked coasting, but I'm trying to embrace it. I'm thinking of it as a new trick. It's fun."

The teen-ager skated up, dragging his toe to slow down while casually extending his glove for a fist bump. Then he asked for a selfie. "I met you here over the summer," he said.

"Good to see you again," Hawk said with practiced courtesy. "You been skating much?"

"Yeah, but this is actually only my second time at this park," he said. Light was fading, but there was still enough. Hawk put down his board and pushed toward the embankment. The teen-ager followed.

"It's a rad park for sure," Hawk said.

"Oh, definitely," the kid said. "Every time I skate here, you're here, too."

—Bret Anthony Johnston

DEPT. OF KNOTS
STRINGING ALONG

In 1979, the artist James Inoli Murphy tried out the idea of using string figures—those cat's-cradle games of loops and knots—to teach math to recalcitrant students. "It is a pleasure, it is an active meditation, and it is an entire ballet—a hand dance that you are doing," he said the other day, slipping a string off his wrist and sliding it around his crooked fingers. The students in the remedial Topics in Math class that he taught at LaGuardia, the city's performing-arts high school, took to the approach. "The dance department fell in love with me," he said.

Murphy, who is Cherokee and wears his hair in a long white ponytail, retired from full-time teaching in 1996, but never stopped making string figures. A few years ago, he began using a spray-on acrylic fixative to preserve them. During the pandemic, he estimated, he made about fifteen hundred figures in his Upper West Side apartment. He photographed them and began digitally stitching the images together to form constellations of figures that zoom out to reveal patterns—sinewy loops becoming a field of lace that expands into an amoeba-like colony of bulbous organisms. "These are like little sacred clowns for me," he said, flipping through the photographs on an iPad.

His string creations recently found a wider audience when the Whitney Museum asked him to lead a family workshop, part of the programming connected to "Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith," an exhibition of the work of the Beat polymath, which includes some of Smith's own string figures. Murphy, who is eighty-five, arrived at the museum dressed in mismatched socks that coördinated with strings wrapped around his wrists. He knew Smith in the old days; the workshop would teach people how to make some basic string forms. "This is not my art that I'm showing here. That's my art," he said pointing to the iPad. But, as an educator, he said, "this is the culmination of what I've been trying to do."

Families sprawled on rugs were already fiddling with museum-issued strings. The grownups squinted in confusion, while the children whipped their hands through the air.

Andrew Lampert, who has co-edited a book about Smith's string work, introduced the workshop. "Harry Smith was fascinated with these games and string-figure formations and sought to find out why they existed across so many different cultures," he said. Smith was a kid in the Pacific Northwest when he visited a reservation and saw Native Americans doing string figures.

In the nineteen-eighties, when Murphy was diving deeper into strings, he looked up Smith, who was down on his luck and living on and off with Allen Ginsberg. Murphy wanted to see some out-of-print string-work books in Smith's collection. "He had them but he wouldn't show them to me," Murphy said. "He took notes on what *I* did." They began hanging out together anyway. "I wasn't getting anything out of him, but I like talking strings, and he liked talking strings," Murphy said. "And he liked beer."

Rani Singh, the director of the Harry Smith Archive and a co-curator of the

"It seems like all we talk about anymore is the weather."

Whitney show, smiled. "Harry was a gleaner of information, not a sharer," she said. (Last summer, Singh travelled to a string-figure workshop in Zurich, where she revealed the existence of a thousand-page manuscript by Smith, detailing all his string knowledge.)

At the workshop, Murphy introduced himself and said, "I just want you to see what it looks like live." With a flourish, he brandished a series of diamonds between his hands. The crowd gasped. Murphy flexed his wrists and the figure unravelled. As he moved on to the next figure, he noticed that no one was watching anymore. "In my class, I would make everybody put the strings down when I talked," he said. He shrugged. "They're playing with strings, they're not listening to me. It's just the way strings are."

Around the room, ropy figures formed and then disappeared between flicking fingers, winking in and out like fireflies. There were occasional calls for help. Like a yoga instructor making adjustments, he obliged.

Nancy Salomon Miranda, a teacher at P.S. 146, in Brooklyn, watched from a chair at the side of the room. Murphy had taught strings to her fifth-grade class before the pandemic. "Math is extremely frustrating," she said. "If you can work through your frustration with the strings, you probably can work through your frustration with math." While the group kept twiddling, someone asked Murphy, "Do you know anything about string *theory*?"

Murphy shook his head. "That's physics," he said.

—Sophia Hollander

BRAVE NEW WORLD

LOOK UP

Are aliens among us? Last September, NASA released its Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena Independent Study Team Report. ("U.A.P." is just a rebranding of "U.F.O.," without the flying-saucer baggage.) The study team recommended that NASA collect and analyze more types of data in more types of ways than ever before. The agency has long had satellites and supercomputers at its disposal; the report said that it should also branch out into smartphone apps, for crowdsourcing sightings. The creator of one such app, Enigma Labs, was not named in the report, but its authors have met with the company.

Enigma's founder and C.E.O. is something of an unidentified anomalous phenomenon herself. Publicly, she goes by a single initial, "A." "It has allowed me to really focus," she said of the pseudonym recently, at Enigma's offices, on the Lower East Side, "because there's so much noise out there. The Internet's full of keyboard warriors."

Citizens report U.A.P. sightings on the Enigma app and can also view reports clustered by location. An augmented-reality lens lets users point a phone upward, and then displays and I.D.s planes, satellites, and other mundane objects. A, who is tall and thin, said, "It's Shazam for what's in the skies." There's also a camera feature that records uncompressed video and embeds metadata, such as filming location and angle, for later description and verification of phenomena.

A expects the app to inspire a growing movement. "It's no different from people who go to Burning Man or are into wellness, meditation, yoga, psychedelics, all that stuff," she said. "What we're really banking on is this movement that I think SpaceX, the Webb telescope, all of this, is driving, which is just as interesting—Are we alone?" She described the range of experiences that users report: "At the very casual end, it's, 'I was drunk and saw a Starlink,' or whatever. On the very extreme end, it's, 'This moment was the biggest moment in my life.'" While implementing data science, the team wants to offer a safe space for users who may feel traumatized and isolated. Enigma Labs decided not to mark cases on the app as resolved (when, say, the U.A.P. is clearly a balloon); they won't harsh anyone's buzz. "We're in listening mode," A said.

As opposed to Martian hunters who fixate on little green men, A said, "we see ourselves as a quite clean break from the past, and just approaching it as a Silicon Valley startup would approach any problem." Enigma is in talks with government agencies about combining its reports with radar and satellite data. She went on, "The holy grail is to have the low-side civilians and the high-side eyes on the same thing."

Two Enigma data scientists joined A in a conference room to discuss how they were using machine learning to assign a score to sightings, based on factors such as credibility and unidentifiability. The algorithm is still a work in progress. A recent browsing of sighting reports included one, from Delaware City, which began, "Watching vintage baseball game, spotted 4, stationary, metallic objects to the north of our location." A photo reveals what look like marker balls on power lines. (Score: 36 out of 100.)

Another user posted a video of a black dot in a blue sky, perhaps a bag in the breeze, near the Empire State Building. "It's like doing a breaststroke motion," the observer commented. "It kind of looked like it was swimming through gravity waves." (Score: 19.)

Two outside guests attended an all-hands meeting. One, Nick Pope, who investigated U.A.P.s at the U.K.'s Ministry of Defense and now does media commentary for such TV shows as "Ancient Aliens," described alien sightings as "almost the ultimate low-probability, high-impact scenario." The other, Josh McFarland, a venture capitalist, gave a business pep talk. "You're looking for speeds, maneuvers, and accelerations outside of the natural envelope," he said. "That's the definition of a startup."

"If I was Sean Kirkpatrick," Pope said, naming the then director of the Department of Defense's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, "I would be saying, 'Please take this for us.' Because you'll get some good stuff, but you get the crazies. There's no way he can do his job if he's inundated with public data, yet Congress has kind of mandated you to do that job."

"Well, the congressmen know us pretty well," A said. "I've met with a lot of them, and they love us."

Employees keep their levels of belief to themselves. A isn't interested in trying to explain stubborn U.A.P. cases; she's happy to entertain the possibility of ancient aliens, future humans, advanced fighters, billionaires' antigravity toys, multidimensional projections, or humdrum drones. "U.A.P. is a new field," she said. "It can't be a category until you have data to work with. We're doing the picks and shovels of that. And hopefully we'll empower a lot of people to come up with their own theories. We'll leave that to the Nobel Prize winners."

—Matthew Hutson

PERSONAL HISTORY

GOODYEAR

On tires, toenails, and walks with an old friend.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

It was a midsummer afternoon and my old friend Dawn and I were walking from an un-air-conditioned Nepalese restaurant to our hotel in the dull, flat town of Montrose, Colorado. The sun seemed larger than usual, and brighter. It felt as if we were under a broiler. The road we were on was six lanes wide, or maybe eight. There was no sidewalk, so we were pressed right up against the curb, being passed by flatulent motorcycles—their riders helmetless—and eighteen-wheel trucks that were equally loud but at least generated a breeze. One of the many good things about Dawn is that she never complains about walking, never says, "You told me it was only another few blocks an *hour* ago," never moans that her feet are tired or so swollen that her shoes no longer fit. The farther the better, that's our motto.

Our record is forty-three miles in a single day—ninety-one thousand steps, according to our Fitbits. "Where did you do this?" people ask when I boast about it. It's a question that baffles me. If someone told me he'd eaten seventy-five corn dogs in one sitting, my response wouldn't be "Where?" but "Why not seventy-*six* corn dogs? Why not eighty?"

We always talk about breaking our record—going for a hundred thousand steps—but now I worry that we might be too old, and how weird is that? I was *nineteen* when we met in the front hall of our dormitory at Kent State, and Dawn was a year younger. We know each other's siblings, and before they all died we knew each other's parents as well. Dawn's father was a jazz musician who fell to his death in a skydiving accident when he was fifty. Her mother was a former flight attendant who doted on her two sons but constantly picked at her daughter's appearance, though I'll never understand why. Dawn dresses like a Swiss person. That is to say, she looks at all times as if she is headed to the airport, where she will fly business class. Everything matches or is color-coördinated, usually in earth tones. When I tell people that her wedding dress was brown, she corrects me, saying, "Not brown—*driftwood*."

Which is brown.

She makes all her own clothes, Dawn, save for some socks and underwear, though she could likely turn those out as well. Of everyone I know, she'd fare best if forced to live in a secluded cabin or fifteenth-century Europe. She just has that look about her—wiry and no-nonsense. Doesn't own any makeup. Smells like a cardboard box. Dawn grows her hair out, then chops it off to donate it to cancer patients. What remains is naturally straw-colored—not a touch of gray—and easy to imagine beneath a bonnet or a snood. She hasn't used an A.T.M. since 1990, when the machine ate her card, and as for a phone, forget it. Can't make calls but can make yarn, paper, ink, and some kind of non-dairy ice cream that tastes like fallen leaves.

Dawn travels with me quite often when I'm on tour. She likes working the line, writing people's names on Post-it notes and sticking them to the title pages of the books to be signed.

"Who was that . . . woman?" someone will invariably ask, implying that Dawn had been strict or unfriendly.

Once, in Uruguay, I forced her to take a test that would determine whether she was autistic. I'd had my suspicions but became certain after we spent a Halloween together and I watched her hand miniature staplers and homemade granola bars to the trick-or-treaters who came to her door.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKEL JASO

"Kids don't want crap like that," I told her as one after another stomped off into the dark.

"Sure they do," she said. "I mean, it's the kind of stuff *I'd* want."

"Yes, well, you're strange."

To my great surprise, Dawn turned out *not* to be autistic.

What puts people off is most likely her body language—the way she crosses her arms over her chest, for example, makes her look impatient. Also, her voice can be kind of flat. Totally flat, actually, if she doesn't know you. "What?" she says when I point it out. "I'm friendly. I'm always friendly!"

During the height of the pandemic, a woman spit on Dawn. "We were in the grocery store, and I hadn't done anything to her," she told me. "I guess she didn't like that I had a mask on."

One of Dawn's lungs collapsed when she was in her late fifties, so she was super cautious about COVID—kept her face covered long after everyone else had returned to normal. We were in Chicago together, at O'Hare, in the spring of 2022, when I told her she needed to take it off.

"But—" she said.

"Let it go," I told her. "Everyone else has."

I felt like a director coercing an actress to unhook her bra for a sex scene. "Come on," I said. "You can do this. Start by just . . . lowering it to your chin."

She took off her mask, and then of course immediately got COVID—a bad case, too. All my fault, but she's never held it against me.

Fifteen months later, walking along the busy highway in Montrose, Colorado, we came upon three eighteen-wheelers parked on a dusty lot. The doors of one were open, and inside were stacks of new-smelling tires. "If you had a year, do you think you could eat one of those?" I asked, pausing to wipe the dirt and sweat off my forehead with a bandanna I'd been carrying. "If you had to, I mean."

Dawn looked inside the truck. "A tire? Sure, if it didn't kill me. First thing I'd do is cut it into three hundred and sixty-five pieces, then divide each of those into pill-size portions I'd eat throughout the day."

It was exactly what I would do. "I wonder what percentage of people would put it off to the last minute," I said. "Can you imagine? Time is almost up. You have a knife in one hand, a fork in the other, and are staring down an untouched radial tire thinking, Fuck!"

A convertible roared by, and we could briefly hear the music the driver was playing, a song that neither of us would ever voluntarily listen to. "That's what my brother would do—put it off," I told her. "Then, there'd be people who'd wait until the last minute *and* beg you to help them. It's the Ant and the Grasshopper, when you really think about it, and, though I'm not *proposing* this, if you had to cull the population, I think this would be a pretty good way to do it. Those who eat their tire by the deadline stay. Those who put it off and make excuses die."

"That seems fair," Dawn said, adding that kids could be given bicycle tires.

Our hotel in Montrose was so close to the airport we could hear car doors slamming as passengers were dropped off at the terminal. "Love you." "Call us when you get there."

It was a boxy chain place, meat-locker cold and smelling of chlorine. But the young woman at the front desk, who had a streak of blue in her hair and wore enough makeup for three people her size, was efficient and welcoming. While checking in earlier that afternoon, we'd learned that she'd soon be taking the exam for her cosmetology license. Her study book was beside her when we came in after lunch, so we asked her to throw us a few test questions.

"O.K.," she said, and glanced down, squinting. "How long does it take for a lost toenail to grow back?"

"A year," Dawn said quickly, the way a contestant on a game show might, adding that she and I lose them all the time.

The young woman took a half step back. "*Why*?"

"Because we walk so much," I told her. "Every other month, I'll pull off a sock, feel something hard inside of it, and realize . . ."

". . . you've lost a toenail," Dawn said. "Sometimes I'll tape mine back on," she continued. "It gives the little membrane underneath more protection as it grows."

This was something that I hadn't known. "You *tape* your toenails back on?"

She looked down at her feet. "Well, sure, but not *all* of them."

The young woman's next question had to do with pH balance. Dawn got that answer right, too, though it may have been luck. I mean, it *was* multiple choice.

We were in Montrose because we had to fly out very early the next morning, and so it seemed smarter to stay near the airport than in Telluride, where my reading would take place. Because I never got my license and Dawn is, admittedly, a hopelessly bad driver, a man named Kevin had been hired to chauffeur us. He was sixty, I guessed, and had graying hair gathered into a foot-long ponytail. When Kevin was young, he and his brothers would set traps and catch muskrats and beavers. Mountain lions as well. "Then we'd skin 'em out and sell the pelts for clothes and school supplies," he told us.

Dawn, sitting beside me in the back seat, mending a shirt that I had torn, adjusted her glasses. "Killing mountain lions! I don't like that one bit!"

I didn't like it, either, but what do I know of life in the West, of growing up poor on the back of a horse? Then, too, I'm just not confrontational. If someone told me he kept a dozen teen-age girls locked in his basement as sex slaves, I'd likely ask, "Does it cost a lot to feed them?" Not Dawn, though.

"The other night, we were in Beaver Creek," I said to Kevin, hoping to change the subject. "Have you been? They have a store there that sells wine and spirits and is called Beaver Liquors. No joke!"

As he laughed, we came upon a mean-looking town where, we were told, "True Grit" had been filmed. The hills surrounding it were scrub-covered and severe—crawling with snakes, I suspected. A sign in front of a church read "It's *Not* Hot as Hell."

A bit farther along, the land was

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greener, and Kevin pointed out Ralph Lauren's nearly seventeen-thousand-acre Double RL Ranch. Then he showed us a spot where, a few nights earlier, he'd come upon a bear and her cub crossing the road. "They was taking their sweet time, too," he said. "I stopped right yonder and waited for them to reach the other side."

The land changed again an hour or so later, as we neared Telluride. Now there were steep mountains with red cliffs visible through the aspens. "Pronghorns get up there, then kick damn rocks down on you," Kevin said. I had been on the fence about him but now felt certain that, given a year, he would have not only eaten his tire but helped someone else eat theirs.

Because of its film festival, I'd thought Telluride might be good-sized, but in fact it's dinky—only two and a half thousand year-round residents.

We had arrived early and had an hour to wander about before returning for sound check. Know someone for as long as I've known Dawn and you figure you've got pretty much everything covered, at least in your pasts. So it surprised me, during our walk, to learn that when she was seven she befriended a man of twenty-six who lived not far from her family in Marion, Ohio. "I don't remember where we met. He was single, and I'd go to his house after school. Maybe we'd play board games or go on bike rides, depending on the weather. He was a lot of fun."

We had discovered Telluride's outdoor pool and were looking at the swimmers through the chain-link fence. "What did your parents think?" I asked.

"For a long time, they didn't know," Dawn said. "Then my dad found out. After the two of them finally met, he came to me saying, 'You didn't mention that your friend Howard is deaf.' I was, like, 'Really? I just thought he was quiet.'"

"Quiet is letting the other person do most of the talking," I told her. "Deaf is letting them do *all* of it. That aside, I love that no one made a big stink about it. Can you imagine that happening now? The man would be arrested, along with the parents. Everyone would go directly to jail except for the kid, who'd be in mandatory counselling for the rest of her life."

It's startling to age and hear yourself talking like this: "When I was young, a child could have a lonely adult bachelor as a friend!"

"He had a lot of javelins in his house," Dawn recalled. "It turned out he'd thrown them at the '64 Olympics."

"That makes it even better!" I said, brushing some cottonwood fluff from the back of her dress, then leaving my hand to rest for a moment on her shoulder.

When people ask how I know Dawn, I sometimes say, "She was my girlfriend my second year of college." I always worry, though, that it makes her look dumb, especially if I'm at the theatre after a reading and am wearing a sports coat that for all intents and purposes is a gown. She *was* my girlfriend, though. Held my hand as someone in our dorm basement pierced my ear. Wrapped her arms around my waist as we sledded down the campus's one decent hill. Stayed up nights to help me with sculpture projects. Everyone knew us as a couple. We were in love. Back at Kent State, loving Dawn meant hating myself—for being gay, for being too cowardly to admit it, and, ultimately, for hurting her the way I did. I will forever be grateful that she forgave me, and that we can be in love again. "How's your little wife?" Hugh will ask after she and I have spent time together.

Does Dawn's husband, Matt, behave this way? I often wonder. The thing is that she and I knew each other first—before Hugh and Matt. Before Reagan and AIDS. Before computers and Fox News and Run DMC. My feelings toward her are proprietary. Though currently on loan to her husband and stepchildren in the city of Red Wing, Minnesota, Dawn is mine, and although we've never discussed it, I'm pretty sure I'm hers as well. I know because I can feel it. When we're travelling and when we're apart. In high-altitude Telluride and sea-level Singapore. In Japan and the United Arab Emirates. In Argentina and Iowa and all the places we go just so we can walk our toenails off and be together. ♦

WE'RE SORRY TO SEE YOU GO

BY BILL SCHEFT

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☐ Who am I kidding? I'm no longer relevant.
☐ These e-mails no longer apply to me.
☐ You know who these e-mails would absolutely apply to? My ex-wife's father, Marvinthegreat@hotmail.com.
☐ These e-mails are condescending. Maybe don't open with "Are we going too fast?"
☐ Does this e-mail look infected?
☐ What are you, writing a book?
☐ I have no idea why you think my name is Narcissus.
☐ I have a salt deficiency.
☐ I have a nut allergy.
☐ And although I see where you're going, that includes salted nuts.
☐ I think we should start seeing other e-mails.
☐ I thought this subscription was like Netflix, where you drop all the e-mails at once.
☐ I didn't get an e-mail last month when my aunt died. Nice.
☐ And, yes, I checked my spam folder.
☐ I find the font you use in the subject line overly aggressive. Not **bold**. Aggressive. Big difference.
☐ I'm an autumn.
☐ I'm an enigma.
☐ I'm an enigmautumn.
☐ I don't believe 94% cotton is the same as 100% cotton. I'm funny that way.
☐ For the gajillionth friggin' time, weather is NOT climate.
☐ Did you say something? No? Yeah, I thought so. . . .
☐ Thanks for taking my call. I'm going to hang up and listen.
☐ I don't think it's anybody's business when I drive my niece in the middle of the night from Fort Worth to Carroll Gardens.
☐ I think we have wildly different concepts of the term "bundle."
☐ I could give a crap about Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce.
☐ I don't believe the Bill of Rights was an inside job.
☐ It's complicated.
☐ You understand Pets.com doesn't exist anymore, right?
☐ I don't think storing boxes of stolen confidential government files in a bathroom should be considered "staging" the bathroom for prospective buyers.
☐ Your e-mails may cause drowsiness.
☐ I have a problem with the women on "Abbott Elementary" having that kind of wardrobe on a public-school teacher's salary.
☐ I am not a proofreader, and I know pronouns are a delicate subject, but "youse" is not a pronoun.
☐ I don't want to be inundated. I want to be desired.
☐ Exactly why does a marketing company need my platelets?
☐ For the life of me, I have no idea what "Chansons" is. Or are.
☐ Because "Come on, I'll lose my job, bro . . ." failed to charm me.
☐ I don't believe the Civil War was fought over minimum wage.
☐ Seriously, there's a show called "So Help Me Todd"?
☐ I had to. Today's Wordle was SCRAP.
☐ Why would a faith-based organization offer me five hundred dollars in free bonus wagers?
☐ It's all explained in my video, "Why I'm unsubscribing!," recorded by George Santos for five hundred dollars.
☐ And I don't mean five hundred dollars in free bonus wagers. I mean five Benjis, Jackson.
☐ So, let me get this straight. You can send me e-mails whenever you want, but I can't reply by sending you a full-color flyer for my one-man show, "Whine Spectator"? (And not just a flyer. A flyer with a coupon for a comped ticket.)
☐ Some of your e-mails, and I'm not saying all of them, smell like ass.
☐ DO NOT DRIVE THIS CAR INTO MEXICO!
☐ That QR code you sent me two months ago? I found the tepee, the Greek letter rho, Example IV(a) in the male-pattern-baldness diagram, and the former corporate logo for Atari. Still have not received my cash prize. And don't act like you don't have my routing number.
☐ Can I finish?
☐ But HER e-mails . . . ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF POLITICS

RULING-CLASS RULES

How to thrive in the power élite—while declaring it your enemy.

BY EVAN OSNOS

As a young man in the nineteen-eighties, Tucker Swanson McNear Carlson set out to claim his stake in the establishment. His access to money and influence started at home. His stepmother, Patricia, was an heir to the Swanson frozen-food fortune. His father, Dick, was a California TV anchor who became a Washington fixture after a stint in the Reagan Administration. For fortunate clans like the Carlsons, it was "A Wonderful Time," to borrow the title of a volume of contemporaneous portraits of "the life of America's elite," which included "the Cabots sailing off Boston's North Shore, and Barry Goldwater on the range in Arizona."

As a teen-ager, Carlson attended St. George's School, beside the ocean in Rhode Island, one of sixteen American prep schools that the sociologist E. Digby Baltzell described as "differentiating the upper classes from the rest of the population." Carlson dated (and later married) the headmaster's daughter. His college applications were rejected, but the headmaster exerted influence at his own alma mater, Trinity College, and Carlson was admitted. He did not excel there; he went on to earn what he described as a "string of Ds." After college, he applied to the C.I.A., and when he was rejected there, too, his father offered some rueful advice: "You should consider journalism. They'll take anybody." Soon, Carlson was writing for the *Policy Review*, a periodical published by the Heritage Foundation, followed by *The Weekly Standard*, *Esquire*, and *New York*, while also becoming the youngest anchor on CNN.

But, in 2005, Carlson's CNN show was cancelled, and, after a period of wandering—including a failed program on MSNBC, a cha-cha on "Dancing with the Stars," and an effort to build a right-wing answer to the *Times*—he found success at Fox News. There, he developed a dark new mantra. "American decline is the story of an incompetent ruling class," he told his audience, in 2020. "They squandered all of it in exchange for short-term profits, bigger vacation homes, cheaper household help." It was an audacious message from a man with homes in Maine and Florida, a reported income of ten million dollars a year, and Washington roots so deep that the Mayflower Hotel honored his standing order for a bespoke, off-menu salad. (Iceberg, heavy on the bacon.) But Carlson framed his advantages as proof of credibility; he told an interviewer, "I've always lived around people who are wielding authority, around the ruling class." His origins helped give fringe ideas—such as the conspiracy theory that George Soros is trying to "replace" Americans with migrants—the ring of inside truth. His eventual firing from Fox only fortified his persona as a dissident member of the power élite.

In declaring war on the upper class that made him, Carlson joined a long, volatile lineage of combatants against the élite. From the beginning, the United States has had a vexed relationship to distinctions of status—a by-product of what Trollope called our "fable of equality." Americans tend to root for the adjective ("élite Navy SEALs") and re-

American politics is full of élites assailing the élite, but behind the name-calling is a real and urgent problem.

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

sent the noun ("the Georgetown élite").

What's different these days is that so many of the attacks come from inside the palace walls. Senator Josh Hawley, a Missouri Republican, grew up comfortably (his father was a bank president), graduated from Stanford and from Yale Law School, taught at a British school for "gifted boys," and met his wife when they both clerked for Chief Justice John Roberts. But he ignores these credentials when he criticizes what he calls "the people at the top of our society." As a religious conservative, he believes that his values leave him disadvantaged, writing in 2019, "Our cultural elites look down on the plain virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice." The Florida congressman Matt Gaetz—the son of a wealthy healthcare entrepreneur who for years served as the head of the state senate—called his rival Kevin McCarthy "the most elite fund-raiser in the history of the Republican caucus." This was instantly understood to be an insult.

Even as the ruling class has become a preoccupation of the right, it remains a concern on the left. Senator Bernie Sanders had such an abundant audience for his latest book, "It's OK to Be Angry About Capitalism," that his royalties nearly matched his salary for representing Vermont. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who entered Congress denouncing the "tippy-top of the one per cent," has become a target of activists further to the left, who accuse her of turning into an "Establishment liberal." Critiques of the élite now emanate from so many angles that it's difficult to know who remains to be critiqued.

Nobody in American public life has a more unsettled relationship to status than Donald Trump. For years, as he elbowed his way into Manhattan and Palm Beach, he touted the exclusivity of his golf courses ("the most elite in the country") and hotels ("the city's most elite property"), and he promoted Trump University with the message "I want you to become part of an elite wealth building team that works under my direction." (He later agreed to a twenty-five-million-dollar settlement with former students who described Trump U. as a scam.) None of his élite talk endeared him to what he called "the tastemakers," who dismissed him as a boorish trespasser. Even after he turned his Mar-a-Lago estate into a private club, he still resented those who had sniffed at him, telling an interviewer, in a tone rarely employed after the age of twelve, "I have a better club than them."

When Trump ran for President, he adopted the expected criticism of "media élites," "political élites," and "élites who only want to raise more money for global corporations." But, after he took office, he didn't seem to want to do away with the idea of an élite; he just wanted his own people to be on top. During a 2017 speech in Arizona, he told the crowd, "You know what? I think *we're* the élites."

The term is now invoked so ubiquitously that it can seem to crumble through our fingers. As George Orwell wrote, about a frequent accusation of the nineteen-forties, "The word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable.'" But, if our élites are undesirable, what would a better élite look like? What, exactly, are élites for?

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, living as a wealthy recluse in Switzerland, was at work on some of the earliest statistical research into what we now call income inequality. By his count, twenty per cent of the population of Italy owned about eighty per cent of the land. He found a similar ratio in another, more eccentric area: twenty per cent of the pea pods in his garden yielded eighty per cent of the peas. Pareto took to describing these imbalances as a "natural law," known as the "80/20 rule."

Pareto wanted a pithy term for his concept, but "ruling class" was out—it had been popularized by his archrival, the scholar Gaetano Mosca. Instead, he adopted *élite*, a French word derived from the Latin *eligere*, which means "to choose." Pareto intended it to be neither a pejorative nor a compliment; he believed that there were élite scholars, élite shoe shiners, and élite thieves. Under capitalism, they would tend to be plutocrats; under socialism, they would be bureaucrats.

His formulation suggests several varieties of élite influence. There is the cultural power wielded by scholars, think tanks, and talkers; the administrative power radiating from the White House and the politburo; the coercive power resident in the police and the military. (Security forces constitute the strongest branch of élites in much of the world but the weakest in America.) Looming over them is economic power, which has occupied a fluctuating position in the West—worshipped, except when it is scorned.

In ancient Athens, wealthy citizens supported choruses, schools, and temples, on pain of being sentenced to exile or death. From the late Middle Ages, philosophers proposed that, instead of banishing the rich, society should exploit their bounty. The Tuscan humanist Poggio Bracciolini argued, in "On Avarice," that in times of public need the prosperous élite could be made to serve as a "private barn of money."

This idea prevailed for centuries. During the American bank crisis of 1907, a group of tycoons that included John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan put up personal funds to bail out the financial markets. But that crisis also marked the end of an era: it spurred the creation of the Federal Reserve, which relieved the economic élite of an "onus they had carried since medieval times," according to Guido Alfani, the author of "As Gods Among Men," a new history of wealth in the West. Freed of that responsibility, the rich of the early twentieth century became both more entrenched and more extraneous, attracting criticism from regulators, muckrakers, and the growing ranks of organized labor. Alfani notes a pattern that unfolds "repeatedly and systematically across history": when economic élites become ingrown, impenetrable, and "insensitive to the plight of the masses," societies tend to become unstable.

To prevent that kind of instability, Pareto believed, the upper echelons of power must stay open to new contestants, in a process that he called the "circulation of élites." Hugo Drochon, a historian of political thought at the University of Nottingham, told me, "Pareto's metaphor was the river. If it is not moving anymore, and it's becoming crystallized, then you are more likely to have a revolt, because of forces rising up."

That risk—of a stagnant, crystallized ruling class—inspired the sociologist C. Wright Mills, who explored

the American implications in his 1956 book, "The Power Elite." (As the term gained currency in English, many publications, though not all, dropped the accent from the "e.") The élites "accept one another, understand one another, marry one another, tend to work and to think if not together at least alike," he wrote. Once ensconced, they rarely lost power, he warned; they simply swapped seats, moving among industry, academia, media, and public office. Mills laid the foundation for the idea of a "military-industrial complex," which Dwight Eisenhower popularized in a 1961 speech. (According to some historians, Eisenhower wanted to add "scientific" or "congressional" to that complex, but it was nixed.)

An invective was born. Scholars on the left used it against conservatives who opposed the rise of Black and women's studies. Conservatives, tapping into the decline of public trust in authority since Vietnam and Watergate, turned the government, the media, Wall Street, and the Ivy League into the swamp, the fake news, the globalists, and the ivory tower. The élite became whoever is peering down on us, judging us, manipulating us.

A century after Pareto laid down the concept, he is rarely read, but Branko Milanovic, a former economist at the World Bank, believes that this is a mistake. In his book "Visions of Inequality," a history of thinking on the distribution of wealth, Milanovic notes that Pareto's era "strongly resembles current capitalist societies." Pareto was writing at a time when vast, entrenched inequality in Europe and America fuelled calls for radical upheaval. He was initially sympathetic to demands for change, but he came to see socialist leaders as a new élite and was courted by the Fascists. He ran unsuccessfully for office, his wife ran off with the cook, and, eventually, he lived as a hermit in a villa with dozens of cats.

His "disappointments may have darkened his frame of mind," Milanovic writes, but they unlocked his insights. "History is the graveyard of élites," Pareto wrote, in perhaps his most oft-quoted—and oft-misunderstood—observation. What he was predicting was not an end to the élite but, rather, its constant regeneration.

These days, the feuding hierarchies—of capital, authenticity, virtue, victimhood—generate separate corps of recruits for the ruling class. Who would fare better in the ongoing cultural contest of Who's the Élite? John Fetterman or Ron DeSantis? Ibram X. Kendi or Britney Spears? Chris Rock or Kid Rock?

Even identifying who is eligible for the élite has grown more complicated. Conservatives venerate the building of wealth and political power but see themselves as persecuted by intellectuals and bureaucrats. DeSantis, in his memoir, "The Courage to Be Free," defines élites as those who "control the federal bureaucracy, lobby shops on K Street, big business, corporate media, Big Tech companies, and universities." But, in a feat of rhetorical gerrymandering, he excludes Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, arguing that, although Thomas occupies the "commanding heights of society," he "rejects the group's ideology, tastes, and attitudes."

Thomas, for his part, focusses his ire on academia, lambasting "know-it-all elites" and declaring that he prefers "Walmart parking lots to the beaches"—though he evidently makes exceptions for certain beaches. Last year, ProPublica reported that for decades Thomas has taken undisclosed luxury vacations, paid for by the Republican donor Harlan Crow, including tropical sojourns on Crow's superyacht and visits to the secretive California retreat Bohemian Grove, where Thomas befriended the Koch brothers. (Another tycoon helped fund the forty-foot R.V. in which Thomas visits those Walmart parking lots.)

Some of the combatants' definitions of "élite" are almost perfectly opposed. In recent writings, Bernie Sanders blasted the "billionaire class, the corporate elites, and the wealthy campaign donors"; Marc Andreesen, the billionaire venture capitalist and campaign donor, enumerated "enemy" ideas that block the advance of technology, including "the nihilistic wish, so trendy among our elites, for fewer people, less energy, and more suffering and death."

Amid the competing accusations, you may find yourself quietly wondering: Am I in the ruling class? For Americans, that tends to be a touchy question. When Paul Fussell, a historian and a social critic, was writing his 1983 satire, "Class: A Guide Through the American Status System," he noticed that people he mentioned it to responded as if he had said, "I am working on a book urging the beating to death of baby whales using the dead bodies of baby seals."

Fussell, undeterred, catalogued the markers of the upper class: frequent house guests ("implying as it does plenty of spare bedrooms to lodge them in and no anxiety about making them happy"); tardiness ("proles arrive punctually"); and, as in the case of the young Tucker Carlson, rumpled bow ties. ("If neatly tied, centered, and balanced, the effect is middle-class," Fussell wrote.) He composed lists, including one that delineated the "only six things" that can be made of black leather without causing "class damage to the owner." (Belts, shoes, handbags, gloves, camera cases, and dog leashes.) He ended the book with a system for evaluating the class valence of the goods on display in your house: "New Oriental rug or carpet: subtract 2 (each). Worn Oriental rug or carpet: add 5 (each)."

Forty years after Fussell's "Class," its most striking feature is its prescience. Before we could see the full contours of our new Gilded Age, Fussell sensed that the middle class was "sinking," pulled down by "unemployment, a static economy, and lowered productivity." A generation whose parents had clambered out of the working class was amusing itself to distraction in a world of proliferating screens and cheap consumption—"prole drift," Fussell called it. The class divide was widening once more, and the greatest gap was the one separating Americans who could protect themselves with money from those who could not. Fussell quoted the working-class father of a man killed in Vietnam: "You bet your goddam dollar I'm bitter. It's people like us who give up our sons for the country."

These days, some of the signifiers have changed; there are fewer takers for a tastefully worn rug. In New York City,

the press has documented the rise of private kitchen staff, rotating teams of nannies, and in-home laundresses who will devote half an hour to ironing a single shirt. For those days when a foray outside the home becomes unavoidable, the Aman hotel offers the private refuge of a members-only club, which charges a two-hundred-thousand-dollar initiation fee and fifteen thousand dollars in annual dues.

Yet the deepest drive is not for stuff but for the social rank that stuff conveys. The musician Moby, who sold twelve million copies of his album "Play," once said that he kept courting success in the music business not to make more money but to "keep being invited to parties." In the 2022 book "Status and Culture," the journalist W. David Marx argues that we are hardwired to pursue status, because it delivers a steady accretion of esteem, benefit, and deference. In ancient Rome, élites were permitted to recline at dinner, while children sat and slaves stood. More recently, the champion golfer Lee Trevino remarked, "When I was a rookie, I told jokes, and no one laughed. After I began winning tournaments, I told the same jokes, and all of a sudden, people thought they were funny."

Status can be frustratingly ephemeral. As you get closer to the top of a pyramid, the steps get crowded. Just ask the senators who peer longingly down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Oval Office, knowing that they are contestants in a zero-sum game. "For every person who goes up," Marx writes, "someone must go down."

Jockeying in a hierarchy, no matter how lofty, occasionally swerves toward the physical. Not long before becoming President, Joe Biden offered to take Trump out "behind the gym" and beat him senseless; Trump, asserting that he had a "much better body," insisted he'd win. In a Senate hearing last fall, Markwayne Mullin, of Oklahoma, told an invited witness, the president of the Teamsters union, "If you want to run your mouth, we can be two consenting adults—we can finish it here."

Their taunts barely registered above the din of other élite standoffs in recent years: Kanye West vs. Taylor Swift, Chrissy Teigen vs. Alison Roman, Lauren Boebert vs. Marjorie Taylor Greene. Each dispute has its own esoteric stakes, but, taken together, they make up a perpetual American undercard, feeding our cravings for entertainment. Peter Turchin, an emeritus professor at the University of Connecticut, calls this an age of "intraelite conflict."

He explains it as a game of musical chairs: each year, we get fresh graduates from Stanford and the Ivy League, bored hedge-fund executives, restless tycoons—all angling for seats. Year by year, their numbers accumulate, but the chairs do not, and the losers become "frustrated elite aspirants." Eventually, one of them will cheat—by faking a kid's college résumé, trading on an inside tip, or trying to overthrow an election. Others will catch on and begin to wonder if they're the last suckers in the bunch. Things fall apart.

That's the pattern that Turchin explores in "End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration." Trained as a theoretical biologist, he now mines a vast historical data set, called CrisisDB, for insights into how societies encounter chaos. The crux of his findings: a nation that funnels too much money and opportunity upward gets so top-heavy that it can tip over. In the dispassionate tone of a scientist assessing an ant colony, Turchin writes, "In one-sixth of the cases, elite groups were targeted for extermination. The probability of ruler assassination was 40 percent."

In fifteenth-century England, he notes, a long spell of prosperity minted more nobles than society could absorb, and they took to brawling over land and power. The losers were beheaded on muddy battlefields. During the three grisly decades of the Wars of the Roses, three-quarters of England's élites were killed or driven out by "downward

"Now, let's get out there and walk really fast to places we don't want to be."

social mobility"—an estimate that scholars reached by studying the declining imports of French wine. Eventually, Turchin writes, "the most violent were killed off, while the rest realized the futility of prolonging the struggles and settled down to peaceful, if not glamorous, lives."

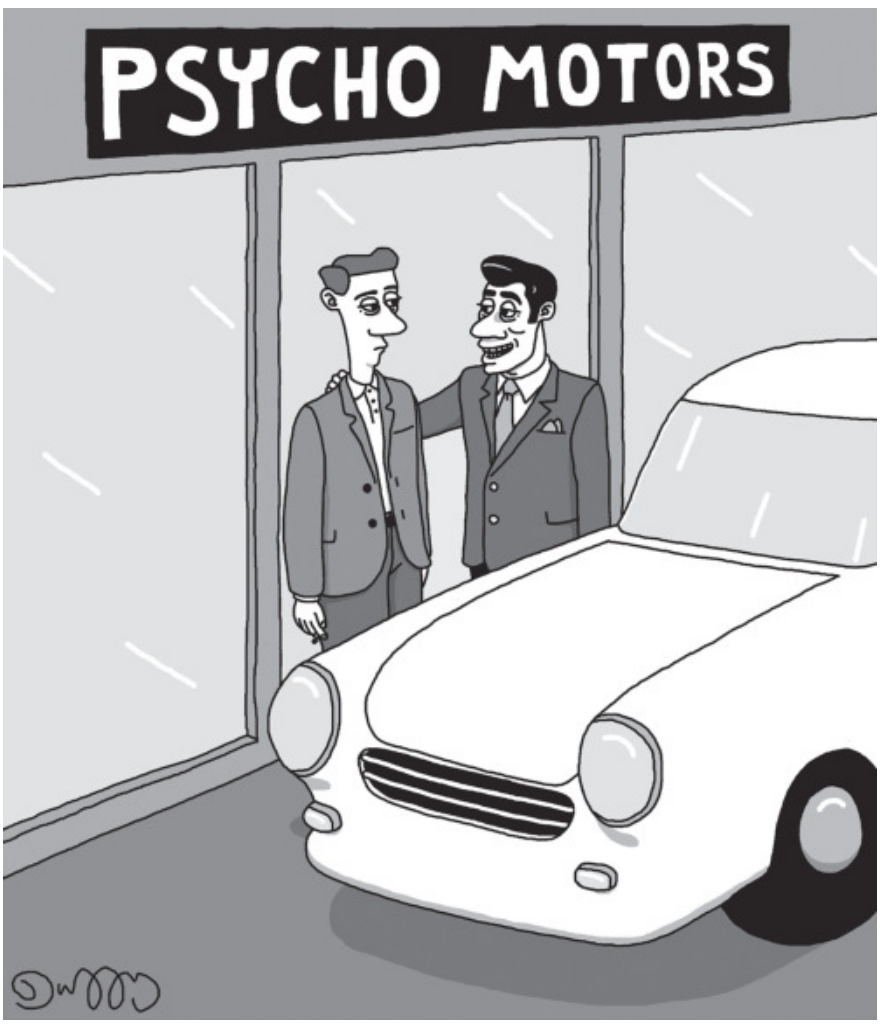
In America's case, history holds two examples with wildly different outcomes. In the early nineteenth century, old-line Southern élites, who profited from slavery and from exports of cotton, faced competition from Northern élites, who made their money in mining, railroads, and steel. They battled first in politics—some ran for office, others funded candidates—but the élites proliferated faster than politics could accommodate them. Between 1800 and 1850, the number of America's millionaires soared from half a dozen to roughly a hundred. During the Civil War, the North's tycoons prospered, the South's went into decline, and the country suffered incalculable damage.

Half a century later, America was riven once more. In the nineteen-twenties, suspected anarchists bombed Wall Street, killing thirty people; coal miners in West Virginia mounted the largest insurrection since the Civil War. But this time American élites, some of whom feared a Bolshevik revolution, consented to reform—to allow, in effect, greater public reliance on those "private barns of money." Under Franklin D. Roosevelt (Groton, Harvard), the U.S. raised taxes, took steps to protect unions, and established a minimum wage. The costs, Turchin writes, "were borne by the American ruling class." Between 1925 and 1950, the number of American millionaires *fell*—from sixteen hundred to fewer than nine hundred. Between the nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-seventies, a period that scholars call the Great Compression, economic inequality narrowed, except among Black Americans, who were largely excluded from those gains.

But by the nineteen-eighties the Great Compression was over. As the rich grew richer than ever, they sought to turn their money into political power; spending on politics soared. The 2016 Republican Presidential primary involved seventeen contestants, the largest field in modern history. Turchin calls it a "bizarre spectacle of an elite aspirant game reaching its logical culmination." It was a lineup of former governors, sitting senators, a former C.E.O., a neurosurgeon, the offspring of political and real-estate dynasties—all competing to convince voters that they despised the élite. Their performances of solidarity with the masses would have impressed the Castros.

When Trump reached the White House, he ushered in allies with similar credentials: Wilbur Ross (Yale), Steven Mnuchin (Yale), Steve Bannon (Harvard Business), Mike Pompeo (Harvard Law), Jared Kushner (Harvard). Though Bannon, the chief strategist, had earned his fortune at Goldman Sachs and in Hollywood, he billed himself as an outsider and sounded every bit the dishevelled count from the Middle Ages. "I want to bring everything crashing down," he liked to say, "and destroy all of today's establishment."

Turchin ends his book with a sobering vision. Using data to model scenarios for the future, he concludes, "At some point during the 2020s, the model predicts, instability becomes so high that it starts cutting down the elite numbers." He likens the present time to the run-up to the Civil War. America could still relearn the lessons of the Great Compression—"one of the exceptional, hopeful cases"—and act to prevent a top-heavy society from toppling. When that has happened in history, "elites eventually became alarmed by incessant violence and disorder," he writes. "And we are not there—yet."



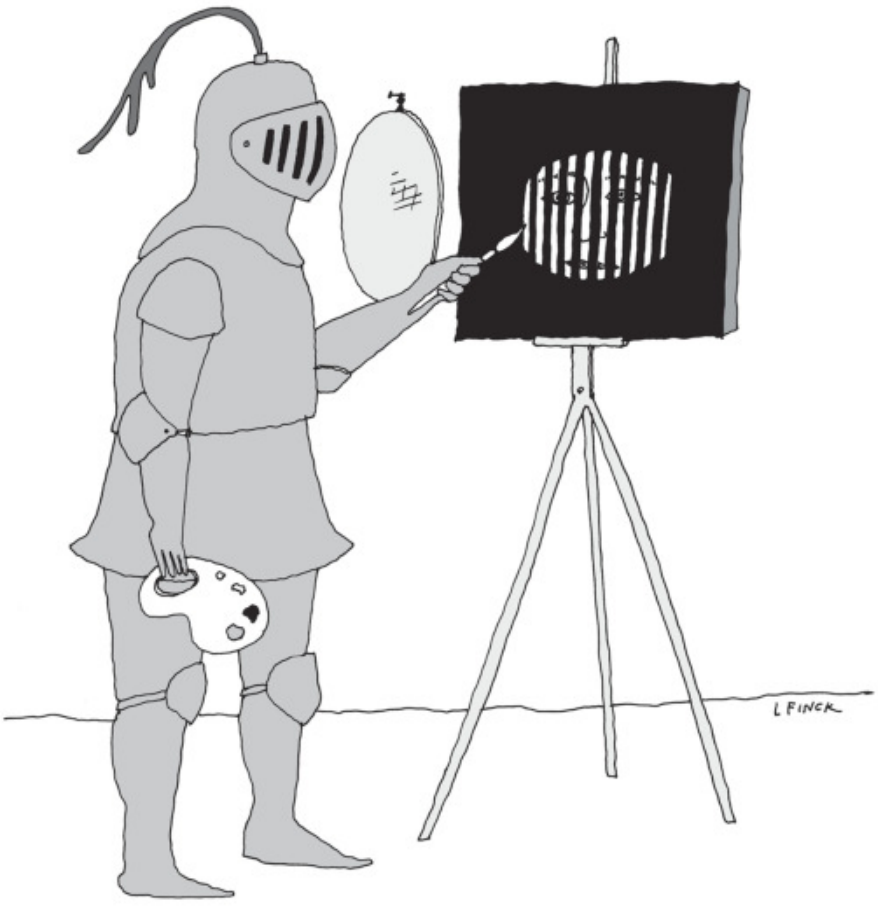
"What will it take for me to get you beneath the wheels of this car today?"

In the summer of 2023, the tussling between two noted American élites entered the realm of burlesque. For years, Elon Musk and the Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg had pri-

vately grumbled about each other. Zuckerberg yearned for the innovator's cred that Musk enjoyed, and Musk lamented (initially) that he was not as wealthy as Zuckerberg. In public, Musk has mocked Zuckerberg's understanding of A.I. as "limited" and said that Facebook "gives me the willies." Last June, after Musk, the owner of Twitter, purged its staff and plunged it into turmoil, Zuckerberg's company announced plans for a "sanely run" alternative. Musk responded by proposing a "cage match," and Zuckerberg, who had been training in Brazilian jujitsu, replied on Instagram, "Send Me Location." Soon, Musk and Zuck—worth a combined three hundred and thirty-five billion dollars—were posing for sweaty gym photos. The Italian government discussed hosting the fight at the Colosseum, and tech bros divided into rival fandoms.

Eventually, Musk put off the fight—he acknowledged that he was out of shape—and Zuck declared that it was "time to move on." But, even interrupted, the billionaire cage match showcased some of the rivalries and insecurities already at work in the next 80/20 society. The gentry of new technologies have displaced the industrial and media barons of an earlier age, but the new hierarchies are still in flux. In Silicon Valley, it's common to hear the prediction that artificial intelligence will yield a world of two broad classes: those who tell the A.I. what to do and those whom the A.I. tells what to do.

Technology won't spare us a ruling class—and, in any case, it's hard to envision a thriving society in which no one is allowed to aspire to status. But, instead of continuing to exhaust the meaning of "the élite," we would be better off targeting what we really resent—inequality, immobility, intolerance—and attacking the barriers that block the "circulation of élites." Left undisturbed, the most powerful among us will take steps to stay in place, a pattern that sociologists call the "iron law of oligarchy." Near the end of the Roman Empire, in the fourth century A.D., inequality had become so entrenched that a Roman senator could earn a hundred and twenty thousand pieces of gold a year, while a farmer earned five. The fall of Rome took five hundred years, but, as the distinguished historian Ramsay MacMullen wrote, it could be "compressed into three words: fewer have more."



Democracy is meant to insure that the élite continue to circulate. But no democracy can function well if people are unwilling to lose power—if a generation of leaders, on both the right and the left, becomes so entrenched that it ages into gerontocracy; if one of two major parties denies the arithmetic of elections; if a cohort of the ruling class loses status that it once enjoyed and sets out to salvage it.

Which brings us back to Tucker Carlson. When he tells the story of America's élites, he often scorns them as "mediocre" and "stupid." But he frames his own failures—the strings pulled on his behalf, the rejected applications, the cancelled shows—as jaunty diversions on the path to success. To be fair, we are all bad at estimating our own abilities. (In a study of college professors, ninety-four per cent rated themselves "above-average.") But Carlson is not just overlooking his history of falling short; he is trying to rebrand it as righteousness. In his broadcasts, first on Fox and now on X, he specializes in giving voice to fellow frustrated élite aspirants: former general Michael Flynn, former Representative Tulsi Gabbard, and, of course, former President Trump, the last of whom is toying with naming Carlson as his running mate. ("I would, because he's got great common sense," he said in November.)

Together, these counter-élites conjure a pervasive conspiracy—of immigrants, experts, journalists, and the F.B.I. It's a narrative of vengeful self-pity, a pining for the wonderful times gone by. Carlson's old friends in the ruling class occasionally wonder how much of his shtick he really believes, and how much he simply grieves for having lost the game of musical chairs to faster, shrewder, more capable élites. The latter, at least, would make his desperation understandable: he *is* being replaced. ♦

CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

Sofia Coppola's path to filming gilded adolescence.

BY RACHEL SYME

When Eleanor Coppola went into labor with her third child, on May 14, 1971, at a hospital in Manhattan, her husband, the director Francis Ford Coppola, was on location in Harlem, shooting a scene for "The Godfather." Hearing the news, he grabbed a camcorder from the set and raced over to capture the moment. "When they say, 'It's a girl,' my dad gasps and nearly drops the camera," Sofia Coppola told me recently, of her birth video. "My mom is there, just trying to focus." The footage—which has been screened by the family multiple times over the years, and as part of a feminist art installation designed by Eleanor—was the first of many instances in which Sofia would be seen through her father's lens. When she was just a few months old, Francis cast her in her first official film role, as the infant in the dénouement of "The Godfather," in which Michael Corleone, the ascendant boss of the Corleone crime family, anoints the head of his newborn nephew as his associates murder rival gangsters one by one.

There are plenty of distinguished bloodlines in the history of Hollywood—the Selznicks and the Mayers, the Warners, the Hustons, the Bergman-Rossellinis, the Fondas—but very few, like the Coppolas, in which one famous director has spawned another. After an early life spent in front of the camera, Sofia Coppola made a career behind it, becoming one of the most influential and visually distinctive filmmakers of her generation, with eight features to her name. Her second, "Lost in Translation," from 2003, earned her an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and a nomination for Best Director, making her the first American woman recognized in that category. Her career, of course, has been bolstered by an unusual wealth of resources. Francis's company, American Zoetrope, has been a producer on all her movies. When she made her début, "The Virgin Suicides," in 1999, she was able to cast an established star, Kathleen Turner, with whom she'd appeared as a teenager in her father's movie "Peggy Sue Got Married." She got permission to shoot "Somewhere," her fourth film, inside the clubby Hollywood hotel the Chateau Marmont because in her youth she was a regular there, and even had a private key to the hotel pool. Still, no director can get a project green-lighted at a snap of the fingers, especially in today's franchise-glutted Hollywood, and especially as a female director in an industry that remains dominated by men. Coppola is self-aware enough to know that it would be bad manners for someone in her position to complain. But she told me, "It's not easy for anyone in this business, even though it looks easy for me."

When we first met, in the fall of 2021, for breakfast near her home in the West Village, Coppola had spent the previous two years at work on her most ambitious venture to date, a miniseries, for Apple TV+, based on the Edith Wharton novel "The Custom of the Country," from 1913. Coppola had adapted the book into five episodes and cast Florence Pugh in the lead role of Undine Spragg, a Midwestern arriviste on a desperate quest to infiltrate Gilded Age Manhattan society. Coppola, like Wharton, is known for her gimlet-eyed portrayals of a rarefied milieu, and for her insight into female characters who enjoy enormous privilege but little autonomy. "Marie Antoinette," her most expensive movie, had a budget of forty million dollars, still modest by Hollywood standards; for "Custom," she was planning for, as she put it, "five 'Marie Antoinettes.'"

At breakfast, though, she told me, "Apple just pulled out. They pulled our funding." Her voice was quiet, and her face—high cheekbones, Roman nose—was placid. "It's a real *drag*," she said. "I thought they had endless resources." During the project's development, she'd gone back and forth with executives ("mostly dudes") on everything from the budget to the script. "They didn't get the character of Undine," she recalled. "She's so 'unlikable.' But so is Tony Soprano!" She added, "It was like a relationship that you know you probably should've gotten out of a while ago." (Apple did not respond to request for comment.)

Coppola grew up watching Francis do battle with movie studios. The success of the "Godfather" films hardly assured him funding equal to his ambitions, and he often went to harrowing lengths to get his projects made independently, driving himself to the brink of bankruptcy or nervous breakdown. "Hearts of Darkness," a documentary co-directed by Eleanor about the notoriously tortured production of "Apocalypse Now," is subtitled, only a bit hyperbolically, "A Filmmaker's Apocalypse." (At the age of eighty-four, Francis is financing a new film, "Megalopolis," with a hundred and twenty million dollars of his own money, freed up by the sale of a portion of the family's wine business.) Coppola absorbed from her father the ethos that it was never worth it to cave to the creative demands of executives. In 2014, she agreed to make a live-action version of "The Little Mermaid" for Universal Studios, but amid disputes during development (including, she said at the time, an executive asking her, "What's gonna get the thirty-five-year-old man in the audience?") she walked away from the job. "I don't actually *want* a hundred million dollars to make a movie," she told me, of studio deals with strings attached. "I learned it's better to do your own thing." She

From Marie Antoinette to Priscilla Presley, Coppola's protagonists enjoy enormous privilege but little autonomy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THEA TRAFF

"What's the cutoff age for just calling instead of texting?"

• •

refuses to take on projects unless she is guaranteed the right to choose her creative team and control the final cut.

In January of 2022, after trying in vain to secure alternative funding for "Custom," Coppola moved on to a new project, an independent film adapted from Priscilla Presley's 1985 memoir, "Elvis and Me." Presley's relationship with Elvis began when she was just fourteen. Like Marie Antoinette, she found herself unhappily married to a King. Paging through the book while in bed with a case of COVID, Coppola had begun to see the picture unfolding in her mind. "I just thought about her sitting on that shag carpet all day," she recalled. She wrote a draft of the script quickly and told her longtime producer, Youree Henley, that she wanted to be done shooting by the end of the year. She was undeterred by the coming release of Baz Luhrmann's eighty-five-million-dollar film "Elvis," which was due out in a few months. A rhinestoned frenzy of a bio-pic, Luhrmann's movie portrayed Priscilla as a marginal character and a happy helpmate. Coppola called Presley and said, "That's not how I see you at *all*," and after hearing Coppola's vision Presley signed on as a producer.

"Marie Antoinette" was filmed inside the real Versailles, a cinematic coup. For "Priscilla," the Elvis Presley estate, wary of a film told from Priscilla's perspective, denied Coppola access to Graceland. Coppola's production team instead constructed the façade and the interiors of Elvis's Memphis mansion on a soundstage outside Toronto. I visited one afternoon in November of 2022, as the shoot was under way. Off set, Coppola, who is fifty-two, dresses with understated elegance—Chanel slingbacks, collared blouses. Now she was wearing her only slightly less polished "set uniform," gray New Balances and a black Carhartt fleece over a Charvet button-down. She led me through the hangarlike space and into the ersatz Presley home. The entrance was flanked by two large lion statues. In the gaudy living room, she pointed to a floral arrangement. "Those are real orchids," she said. "It surprised me, with our budget. How *extravagant*."

Coppola's team had budgeted for forty days of shooting, already a squeeze, but at the last minute a piece of financing had fallen through, and she'd had to slash the story to be filmed in just a month, for less than twenty million dollars. Much of the movie is set in the Memphis summer, but they were filming as winter approached, which was cheaper, so Coppola had to coach her cast, shivering through outdoor scenes in their bathing suits, to "act warm." Instead of filming two long shots she'd wanted in Los Angeles, of Priscilla driving a convertible down a palm-lined street and swan-diving into a pool, Coppola saved money by borrowing footage from a Cartier commercial she'd shot in 2018, with an actress who kind of looks like "Priscilla"'s lead, Cailee Spaeny, at least from behind.

Whether set in a luxury hotel in Tokyo, like "Lost in Translation," or in suburban Michigan, like "The Virgin Suicides," Coppola's films are sumptuous but also slightly clinical. One of her œuvre's visual hallmarks is a protagonist gazing out a window, sealed off from the world beyond. "You know I can't resist a trapped woman," she said. Yet, even when her female characters are confined, they achieve a degree of self-definition through adventures in style. No filmmaker has so astutely depicted the cloistered atmosphere of teen-age girlhood or the expressive power of its trappings. She is a master of the messy-bedroom mise en scène: piles of clothing and impractical shoes, poster-plastered walls, vanities cluttered with perfume bottles and porcelain figurines. The director Chloé Zhao, who won Best Director at the 2021 Oscars for her film "Nomadland," told me that she admires Coppola for "world-building that isn't just based on facts but on emotions." She added, "There's a receptivity to her work. To have a commitment to that kind of femininity is hard." The director Jane Campion, who counts "The Virgin

Suicides" among her favorite films, told me that Coppola's light touch with actors and her attention to surfaces can be deceptive. "Her work is very powerful to me, because it's got deep roots," she said. But Coppola's films have sometimes struck critics as longer on style than on substance, and too close to the privileges they depict to effectively critique them. A few months ago, Coppola sent me an e-mail, unprompted, in which she took issue with a notion that has resurfaced throughout her twenty-five-year career: "I don't understand why looking at superficiality makes you superficial?!"

Coppola told me she could see herself, in an alternative life, as the editor of a magazine, "like Diana Vreeland," who commanded *Vogue* in the sixties. Coppola is an avid curator of images and looks; Campion recalled that once, when they were both judges at Cannes, Coppola offered to help style her, and the next day two huge boxes from the luxury fashion brand Celine arrived at Campion's hotel. Coppola begins every film project by gathering visual inspiration. In her makeshift office on the soundstage, she had covered a large bulletin board with imagery including the Presleys' wedding photographs, a glamour shot of Priscilla as a teen-ager, and several William Eggleston pictures of an empty Graceland. There is a famous Bruce Weber photo of Coppola's stylishly bestrewn home office at the time of "The Virgin Suicides," and this workspace bore some resemblance. On her desk were pink Post-it notes, a Fujifilm Instax camera, and a half-burned Diptyque candle; on the floor lay wine bottles from the Coppola vineyard (which also makes a "Sofia" champagne that comes in tiny pink cans with individual straws). The director Quentin Tarantino, whom Coppola dated in the two-thousands, recalled her once showing him the look book for "Marie Antoinette." "It was exquisitely put together, yet you could still tell it was handmade," he said, "by the loving hands of a fine artist." He went on, "She had a page of donuts with a pink glaze. I asked her, 'What's with the donuts?' She said, 'I like that shade of pink, and I want her sofa to have that quality.' And when I saw the film, sure enough, I wanted to eat the goddamn furniture."

Coppola led me down a hallway to a room where the film's costume designer, Stacey Battat, was floofing out Priscilla's wedding gown, which Coppola had asked the fashion house Chanel to design for the movie as a favor. The dress, with a high-necked lacy bib, closely resembles the original, but among Coppola's assets as a filmmaker is a preternatural aesthetic assurance, even when it comes to taking liberties with her source material. "I've always known what I like," she told me. The opening shot of the film is a closeup of Priscilla's feet stepping across a fuzzy expanse of shag carpet, which she made a rosy hue, though in the real Graceland there was no such rug. "In my mind, it was pink," she told me. She hadn't visited Graceland to prepare for the film, but a friend had taken a tour and had sent her a picture of poodle-print wallpaper. Coppola decided to re-create it for a shot in which Priscilla languishes in the tub, waiting for Elvis to return.

"It probably wasn't in a bathroom in Graceland," Coppola said. "But whatever."

The lighting on set was dim. A playlist of songs, selected daily by Coppola to "set a vibe," played over the sound system—Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin, and the French indie-rock band Phoenix, which is fronted by Coppola's husband, Thomas Mars, who is also a music supervisor for her films. In one corner, crew members were playing pickleball on a court that Coppola had insisted on installing during the first week of shooting. She had played in the crew's tournament, and her team, the Smashers, won. "Pickleball paddles are so ugly," she commented. "Maybe I'll design a new line of them."

Coppola told me that she learned from her father how to create "a warm set," and borrowed from him a ritual he picked up in drama school: to kick off every production, stand with the cast and crew in a circle, hold hands, and recite the nonsense word "puwaba" three times. But the elder Coppola has what Eleanor, who has been married to him for sixty years, described to me as "an Italian approach—very theatrical, throwing stuff up in the air and screaming." Sofia said that she finds such flourishes "so unnecessary." The protagonists in her films tend to observe more than they speak, and Sofia comports herself in much the same way. The people who've worked with her, however, describe an impressive resolve beneath the diffidence. The actress Elle Fanning, who starred in "Somewhere" and "The Beguiled," told me, "She doesn't freak out, ever. She's not going to scream at you across the room. But she's unwavering." Bill Murray, a star of "Lost in Translation" and "On the Rocks," gave Coppola the nickname "the velvet hammer," for her subtle stubbornness about getting her way.

Henley, the producer, who was sitting in a director's chair near a video monitor, recalled a day when he and Coppola were scouting ice rinks for "Somewhere." Coppola said of one, "This is great—um, where should we have lunch?" Afterward, Henley mentioned a few more possible rinks to visit, and Coppola looked puzzled; she'd already chosen. Henley told me, "I wasn't able to read her softness as well as I can now."

Coppola and her team were rehearsing a scene in the Presleys' bedroom, where a large mirror hung behind the bed. Jacob Elordi, the actor playing Elvis, took his place on the King-size mattress, his six-foot-four frame nearly dangling over the edge. Spaeny, who was twenty-four but petite enough to pass for a teen-ager, hovered in the doorframe. The scene takes place shortly after Priscilla's arrival at Graceland. She has gone shopping and bought a dress, but returns it after Elvis deems it unflattering. "Once again I'd compromised my own taste," Presley writes of that moment in the memoir, which in Coppola's world is the worst kind of fate.

Kathleen Turner told me, of working with Coppola on "The Virgin Suicides," "She would never tell an actor what she wanted specifically, and, boy, that can be very tough." She

added, "Francis is a bulldozer, a very good bulldozer who knows what he wants. Sofia lets you *do*, and then lets you know if that's what she wanted." Elordi, who is twenty-six, told me he interpreted Coppola's lack of instruction as a sign of trust. She cast him after meeting him just once. "Sofia never checked in before we were filming. She never texted or called about the voice or the look or the walk," he said. When he arrived on set, excited to show Coppola the Elvis accent he'd been working on for months, she said, "Wow, you really look and talk like him," and left it at that.

Coppola called, "Action!," and Elordi looked at Spaeny: "What is that dress? It does *nothin'* for your figure." He glanced toward Coppola, who was standing with her cinematographer. "Was that all right, Sofia?" he drawled, remaining in character. "Should I be laughing at her? I don't want to be too dramatic."

"It was not too much," Coppola replied. She paused and placed her hand on her chin. "It might have been a *little* Elvis-y."

Francis's life as a director was peripatetic, and he did not believe in leaving his family behind for more than ten days at a time. So the rest of the nuclear unit—Eleanor, Sofia, and her brothers, Roman and Gian-Carlo, or Gio—lived away from their home in Northern California for months, and sometimes years. One of Sofia's first memories is of riding in a helicopter in the Philippines during the filming of "Apocalypse Now." During the making of "One from the Heart," when she was in the fourth and fifth grade, they relocated to L.A. After that, for "The Outsiders" and "Rumble Fish," they went to Tulsa, Oklahoma. "We were circus people, basically," she said. "I kind of mark my childhood by the movies."

Coppola never excelled academically, in part because of all the moving around. She left one school before learning multiplication, and by the time she enrolled in a new one she'd missed the same unit. Coppola recalled, "I never really learned math, and I'm what they call a 'challenged' reader." Anahid Nazarian, a researcher and producer who has worked with Francis for forty years, remembers a time when Coppola didn't turn in a paper: "Her teacher said she had the best excuse, which was 'I left it on the plane coming back from the Oscars.'" On matters of taste, though, Coppola was precociously fluent. She gave herself the nickname Domino and insisted that she be credited as such in several of her father's pictures. While on the set of "One from the Heart," she created her own publication, *The Dingbat News*, to distribute among the cast and crew. She collected photography and decorated her walls with pictures from foreign magazines. "I was the only girl in Napa Valley with a subscription to French *Vogue*," she said. Francis described her as having "very, very big opinions" even as a little girl, adding, "It was never difficult to know what she preferred and what she didn't prefer." Francis's best-known films took place in hypermasculine precincts—the Army, the Mob. Coppola was drawn to high-femme self-expression. At her parents' dinner parties, she was always more interested in the "wives and girlfriends," she said. "They had the best Bakelite jewelry."

Francis recalled that he and Eleanor maintained a home base outside of Hollywood to create a semblance of normality for the kids. Nonetheless, many of the stories Coppola told me about her childhood took place in the world of famous adults: Richard Gere, a star of Francis's "The Cotton Club,"

swam in the family's pool; George Lucas was "Uncle George"; Anjelica Huston assured Coppola that she would grow into her nose. One afternoon last year, during a visit to an L.A. bookstore, Coppola showed me a volume called "Height of Fashion," a collection of notable people's most stylish snapshots. Coppola had submitted a picture of herself at fourteen—gawky and beaming, with an asymmetrical haircut—sitting at the tony Parisian restaurant Davé next to the late fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. "He was a friend of a friend of my parents," she said.

There is an old-world flavor to the Coppolas' relationship to the family business: just as cobblers beget cobblers, movie people beget movie people. Roman, Sofia's brother and frequent collaborator, is a filmmaker and has written screenplays with Wes Anderson. Talia Shire, who starred in the "Godfather" movies and the "Rocky" franchise, is her aunt. Her niece Gia has directed two features. Her first cousins include the actors Jason Schwartzman, whom she cast as a dweeby Louis XVI in "Marie Antoinette," and Nicolas Cage. Other Coppolas coach actors, write screenplays, make music, and produce or distribute films. Sofia ascribes the field's popularity within the family to Francis's contagious passion. "My father is just so into filmmaking that he thinks everyone should be doing it," she said. Even Francis's father, a composer, ended up working on scores for his films, winning an Oscar (with Nino Rota) for "The Godfather: Part II."

One member of the family who struggled to find her way in the business was Eleanor. In "Notes," the first of two memoirs she has written, she described meeting Francis on the set of his début feature, the horror film "Dementia 13," in 1962. He was the director, she was the assistant art director, and she thought that they might work on films together for years to come. Instead, within a few months she found out she was pregnant with Gio. She and Francis were married the following weekend, and Francis, as Eleanor put it to me, "made it very clear that my role was to be the wife and the mother." She writes in "Notes" of a feeling of living in waiting—"waiting for Francis to get a chance to direct . . . waiting to go on location, waiting to go home." ("At that point, I didn't even know I could have a career, much less whether my wife would," Francis said, by e-mail, adding, "I knew she was creative and from day one I always provided full time childcare and a studio for Ellie's artwork.") Sofia described a time when her mother visited the set of "Priscilla" and observed a scene in which Elvis is preparing to go on tour, while Priscilla will stay with their daugh-

HABIBTI GHAZAL

Nineteen's slow violence. Your arm a tusk slicing the air—whoa, habibti—
for that first Jack-and-Coke. Here we go, take it slow, habibti.

Soon, you'll become an emergency: I.V. bag and emerald bruise.
First love hammering your door, but you're no habibti,

no bait turned proposal. On the third page of an old journal,
the same question in pale ink: *Can I be my own habibti*?

You glaze-eyed. You lit like a county fair. The long twine
of a decade, hold the tattoo needle to skin and sew *habibti*.

Even the sea rots here. This prop city with its prop heart.
The hot-eyed men whistling the streets: Hello, habibti.

Hello, cream. Hello, daughter of men. Hello, almost-wife.
I can't teach you about metaphor; I'm stuck in the future. O, habibti,

I want to see those legs running. There's the oncoming headlight of boy:
Ribcage. Fist. War. It's time, habibti. Please, habibti. *Go*, habibti.

—Hala Alyan

ter, Lisa Marie. Eleanor told her, "I've been there." Eleanor recalled to me, "When Elvis said to Priscilla, 'You have everything you need to be happy,' that's exactly what I was feeling at the time. I went to the psychiatrist and said, 'Why am I unhappy?' Not one single person said to me, 'You are a creative person.'"

With his daughter, however, Francis made a point of offering creative encouragement, including by exposing her, along with her brothers, to the technical aspects of filmmaking. "There's a traditional Italian thing with women, but I wasn't raised like that," Coppola said. "I was raised the same as the boys." She and her mother didn't discuss the gap in their experiences at the time, and Coppola isn't inclined to analyze the themes that she explores in her work. Roman told me, "I've never heard Sofia say, 'I want to show this isolation through this thing.'" Francis has always advised her that filmmaking should be close to the bone—as he told me, "the more personal, the better." But, when I asked about the personal element of her movies, Coppola often fell back on abstractions or let her sentences trail off mid-thought. (Other writers have speculated about whether her style of communication is cannily evasive or simply a natural product of valuing the visual over the verbal. "I think sometimes she gives people enough rope to hang themselves with just by not responding," Fiona Handyside, a British film scholar and the author of "Sofia Coppola: Cinema of Girlhood," has said.) When I told Coppola about the feelings of stuckness that Eleanor had shared with me, and that seemed to percolate through Coppola's films, she said, "I think so many people can relate to that, especially women." Then she added, of her mom, "I'm sure seeing my first impression of womanhood as a woman who felt trapped, and her sadness, is related to the women in my films, more than to a side of myself."

One morning last July, I met Coppola in the lobby of the Ritz Paris, where she was staying before a meeting about an upcoming line of garments she'd designed for the Scottish knitwear brand Barrie, which is owned by Chanel. (She told me that her dad, who has earned much of his fortune through wine and hotels, "taught us how to make money doing other things, so that you don't have to count on the movies for that.") Coppola and Mars spend part of the year in Paris, and she could have just stayed in her apartment across town. But the Ritz was closer to Barrie's offices, near the Place Vendôme, and she relished the opportunity to hole up there by herself. "Lost in Translation" and "Somewhere" portray hotels as sites of both listless suspension and electric potential. "I love an in-between place," she said.

When Coppola was fifteen, in 1986, Francis arranged a summer internship for her at Chanel. A month before she was supposed to leave for Paris, Gio, her oldest brother, was killed in an accident. He was twenty-two and had been assisting his father on the film "Gardens of Stone," set at Arlington Cemetery, and on a day off had gone boating with one of the film's co-stars, Griffin O'Neal. While driving between two other boats, O'Neal drove into a towline that struck Gio. (O'Neal was replaced in the film and later charged with manslaughter, but was ultimately acquitted.) Francis's producers offered to shut down the film shoot, but he wanted to press on. In her memoirs, Eleanor recalls his hope that keeping busy "would prevent the torturous reality of Gio's loss from pervading every moment." Roman, then a film student at N.Y.U., cancelled his summer plans to step into Gio's job on the film, but Coppola's parents decided that she should still go abroad. Eleanor told me, "She was right at that age where she was trying to pull away from me, and so I thought she needed to get away from home, and all the things that surrounded the aftermath, and, frankly, me as a mom."

The Coppolas recruited Susie Landau Finch (the twentysomething daughter of the actor Martin Landau), who'd been working for Francis's film company, to chaperone Sofia to Paris. Landau Finch recalled that Gio's young fiancée, Jacqui de La Fontaine (now Jacqui Getty), who was pregnant at the time with their daughter, Gia, came to stay with them in Paris, and they spent many afternoons lying around the apartment in a daze. "The two of them reminded me a lot of what Sofia would later depict in 'The Virgin Suicides,'" Landau Finch said. "The ennui of being overcome by emotion, that kind of

internalizing of tragedy." Eventually, Landau Finch invited Rainer Judd, her husband's niece and the daughter of the sculptor Donald Judd, to join them, and she and Coppola spent the following weeks "eating croissants and drinking Orangina and staying out until dawn clubbing," Judd recalled. She added, "I think there was an awareness of the loss and heaviness, but we were also still playful kids looking at boys and fancy clothes."

At the Barrie offices, a phalanx of employees was preparing for a model fitting. The following day, the brand would be shooting an ad campaign at the Hôtel de Crillon, where Coppola once filmed a party scene for "Marie Antoinette." Coppola walked over to a rolling rack of clothes and stroked a pink cashmere jumpsuit priced at nearly three thousand euros. A velvet-lined tray on a nearby table held gold-and-porcelain buttons monogrammed with "SC." An employee pulled out a double-breasted jacket and handed it to Coppola. She slipped it over her shoulders and looked in the mirror. "Oh, my God, I love it," she said.

Afterward, as we were driving to lunch in a chauffeured black car, we passed the Place de la Concorde. Coppola was gazing quietly out the window. "That's where Marie Antoinette was guillotined," she said. "I always love driving by."

When Francis was working on "The Godfather: Part III" (1990), Sofia was his model for the character of Michael Corleone's daughter, Mary. Studio executives encouraged him to cast Winona Ryder, but when Ryder arrived in Rome, where the movie was filming, she collapsed with exhaustion and was pronounced unable to work. Sofia had enrolled at Mills College, in Oakland, to study art history, but was in Rome for winter break. Francis informed her that she would need to play Mary instead. Paramount executives flew to Cinecittá studios to inform Francis that they did not think she was up to the task, but Francis held firm. Sofia had appeared in nearly all his previous films, though only in small roles; in "The Godfather: Part II," she had been "Child on Ship." She often found being on camera excruciating, and liked film sets mostly for the chance to hang around the costume departments. Still, she was eager to take on the role of Mary, in part because she was bored at college and her father had promised her that she wouldn't have to go back.

A team of acting and public-speaking coaches was hastily assembled, among them Freck Vreeland, the son of Diana, to train Sofia for a scene in which Mary delivers a speech at the Corleone family foundation. Vreeland recalled that Sofia was at first so shy that "she couldn't project her voice, much less assert herself in the way a successful speaker would." Sofia told me that she was mortified by a scene that required her to "kiss Andy Garcia in front of his wife, with my dad standing there." Eleanor's memoirs quote her own diary from the time, in which she noted how Sofia (who, by all accounts, is not much of a crier) would sometimes burst into tears between shoots. She wrote, "Well-meaning people tell me I am permitting a form of child abuse . . . and that in the end she will be fodder for critics' bad reviews that could scar her for years." Compounding the pressure was the film's climactic death scene, when, on the steps of the Teatro Massimo, in Palermo, Mary Corleone is shot by a hit man targeting her father. Compared with Pacino, who brought his signature shouty theatrics to the scene, Coppola seemed barely to be acting at all.

When the film came out, Eleanor's fears proved founded. In 1991, Coppola won two Razzie awards, for Worst Supporting Actress and Worst New Star. *Entertainment Weekly* ran a cover story with the teaser line "Is she terrific, or so terrible she wrecked her dad's new epic?" Whatever one thought of Coppola's performance (Pauline Kael appreciated her "unusual presence"), the fracas lent a metatextual poignancy to Coppola's final moment in the film, when, just before she crumples on the theatre steps, Mary looks at Michael and utters a disbelieving "Dad?" Francis later admitted to the *Times*, "The daughter took the bullet for Michael Corleone—my daughter took the bullet for me." Sofia absorbed the bad press with characteristic sangfroid. "It was embarrassing to be so publicly criticized for ruining my dad's movie," she said, but "I wasn't devastated, because acting wasn't my dream." She went on, "I think that the experience helped me as a director. I know how vulnerable it feels to be in front of a camera." Kirsten Dunst, who starred in "The Virgin Suicides" at the age of sixteen, and later in "Marie Antoinette" and "The Beguiled," recalled, of first working with Coppola, "I remember her telling me how much she loved my teeth. I thought I had crooked teeth, but she was, like, 'They are so cute.' She gave me confidence about things I didn't necessarily have, and I've carried that with me."

In the following years, Coppola had the kind of aimless early adulthood particular to the offspring of the Hollywood élite. She enrolled in ArtCenter College of Design to study oil painting but dropped out after a teacher told her she was "no painter." She audited a course with the photographer Paul Jasmin, whom Coppola cites as "the first person outside my family who told me I had any taste." She became something of an L.A. It Girl, making cameos in music videos and being featured in newspaper style sections. In interviews, she made blithe pronouncements. (Likes: Karl Lagerfeld, hot rods. Dislikes: bras, Twelve Steppers.) At twenty-three, she bought herself a black Cadillac Seville and dubbed it her "Mafia princess car." She spent a lot of time floating around the pool at the Chateau Marmont, making use of her private key. In 1994, she launched a fashion line called Milkfed, which produced ironic items like a baby tee printed with the phrase "I ♥ Booze." That same year, she and her friend Zoe Cassavetes, the daughter of the director John Cassavetes and the actress Gena Rowlands, hosted a Comedy Central series called "Hi Octane." (When I asked Coppola if she has any friends who *don't* have celebrities for parents, she said, somewhat vaguely, "It's definitely not, like, a through line with all of my friendships," but acknowledged a special af-

finity for others who have "big macho powerful artist dads.") The series, in which the pair undertook stunty adventures and interviewed their famous acquaintances, was cancelled after a few episodes. Francis recalled that Sofia once asked him, "Dad, am I going to be a dilettante forever?"

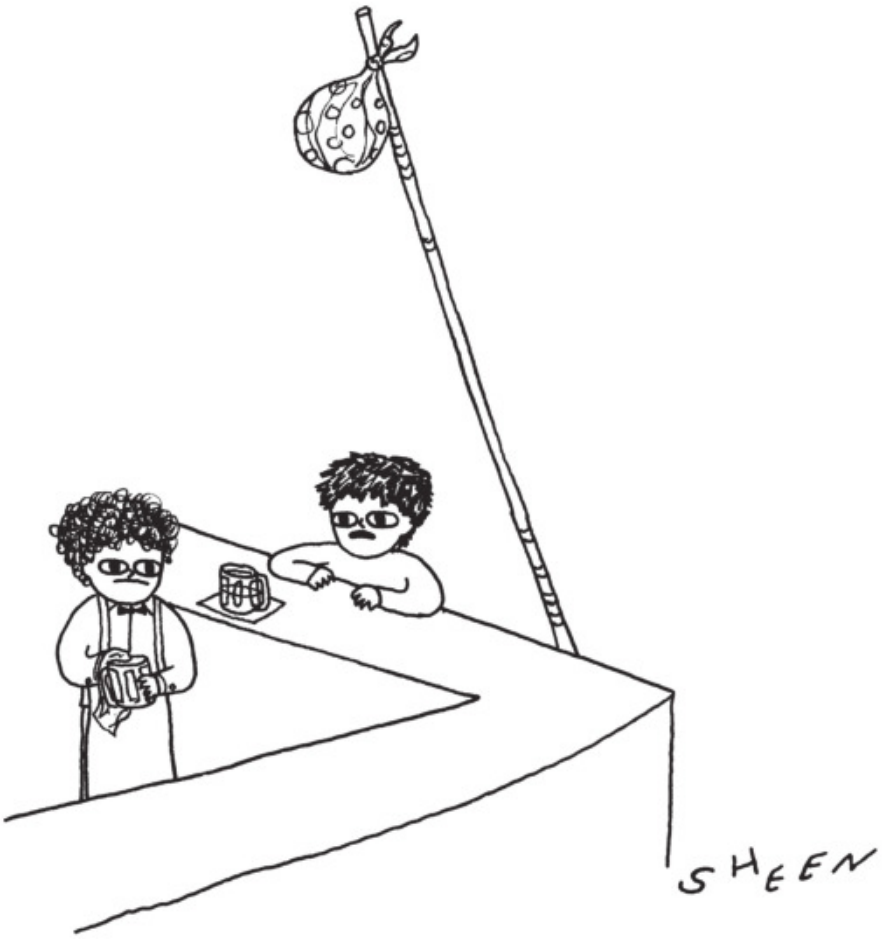
A breakthrough came when Coppola wrote a short film, called "Lick the Star," about a clique of teen-age girls who revere, and then violently ostracize, their queen bee. Her cast featured some of her father's associates, including Peter Bogdanovich as a school principal. The finished film, released in 1998, runs only thirteen minutes and is shot in black-and-white, but it contains the seeds of Coppola's lush cinematic vocabulary. She told me, "I knew a little bit about photography, a little bit about clothing design, and a little bit about music. I was annoyed that I could never pick one thing. And then, when I made my short film, I realized it was a way to work with all of it."

In New York, Coppola lives with Mars and their two teen-age daughters in a red brick town house whose narrow façade makes it look deceptively humble from the outside. One morning last March, she met me at the entranceway with the family's golden retriever, Gnocchi, and guided me into a wide, white-walled living room. Coppola's home décor, like her fashion sense, is classic with a whimsical feminine touch. The mantel over a gray marble fireplace held a large porcelain chinoiserie vase filled with an architectural array of pink roses and anemones. (They were high-end fakes.) A floor-to-ceiling bookcase was organized into sections on fashion, New York, photography, and French history. In between books she had wedged framed art works, including a drawing made by the director Mike Mills for the poster of "The Virgin Suicides" and a Polaroid of Princess Caroline of Hanover taken by Andy Warhol.

Coppola told me that her least favorite film to make was "The Bling Ring," her fifth feature, because the world in which it's set was out of synch with her own sense of taste. The movie—based on the true story of a group of L.A. high schoolers who robbed the homes of the rich and famous—was shot partly inside Paris Hilton's mansion, where the camera gawks at throw pillows emblazoned with images of Hilton's face and a "night-club room" equipped with a dancer's pole. The film is a note-perfect millennial period piece, channelling the haywire intersection of celebrity worship and consumerism at the dawn of social media. But Coppola said, of its milieu of Ugg-boot-wearing teens and the reality stars they worship, "I wouldn't call it hideous—that sounds snobby—but a big part of my motivation is making beauty." To her chagrin, "The Bling Ring" is her daughters' favorite among her movies. "They think it's really glamorous and cool," she said, then added, with a shudder, "They've started asking me for *boot-cut jeans*."

She did not show me the girls' bedrooms, but she later told me that she's begun photographing their messes for posterity. "It's like set dressing for one of my movies," she said. The girls are forbidden to have public social-media accounts until they're eighteen, but Romy, the older child, had a rogue viral moment last year, when—sounding, many observers noted, a bit like one of Coppola's restless protagonists—she posted a plucky TikTok video saying that she'd been grounded for attempting to charter a helicopter with her dad's credit card "because I wanted to have dinner with my camp friend." Coppola, who values privacy and the mystery it can afford, called the video "the best way to rebel against me." (She seemed excited, though, to confirm that Romy had filmed a small speaking role in Francis's upcoming movie.)

Coppola had set out scalloped shortbread cookies on a dainty plate ("I love Italian fancy-lady dishes") and a floppy stack of paper, the manuscript of a coffee-table book, "Sofia Coppola Archive," which she released last fall. The finished volume, as thick and pink as a slice of princess cake, is a scrapbook of Coppola's career, with short, elliptical introductions to each film followed by



"I ran away from a life of pole-vaulting."

a cascade of Polaroids, hand-written notes, contact sheets, script marginalia, costume sketches, and other ephemera.

The first chapter opens with a behind-the-scenes image of Dunst smiling in the grass of a football field. Coppola was in her early twenties when she read Jeffrey Eugenides's novel "The Virgin Suicides," from 1993, about five adolescent sisters in nineteen-seventies Michigan, who languish under the strictures of their ultraconservative parents and all die by suicide in a single year. Coppola said that when she read the book she thought, I hope whoever makes this into a movie doesn't ruin it. Then she realized that maybe she could be the one to do it.

Coppola had started writing the script before she learned that a pair of producers had already bought the rights to the book and were working with a male writer-director. "I could hear my dad saying, 'Don't ever try to adapt something you don't have the rights to,'" she recalled. "He told me to move on to something else." Instead, Coppola sent her script to the producers and asked them to consider her for the directing job should the current arrangement fall through. A year later, she got the call. "I was young and naïve and didn't really know what I was getting into," she told me, "but I was, like, 'Shit, O.K., now I have to figure it out.'"

"Virgin," filmed over a month in the summer of 1998, for a budget of four million dollars, was a remarkably assured début, from its opening shot: Dunst lingering on the hot street eating a cherry Popsicle, like a latter-day Lolita, as the synthy sounds of the band Air kick in. From there the film unfolds at an unhurried pace. The sisters' sadness is scarcely externalized, but the creeping ooze of their despair pervades every frame, including a striking shot of a wooden crucifix with a pink lacy bra slung across it to dry. Eugenides formulated the story as a hazy memory, narrated by a chorus of neighborhood boys who idolize the sisters but know nothing of their inner lives. Coppola's script used a single narrator and allowed the camera to peek into the private spaces where the boys could never go. "Archive" reproduces an e-mail she received from Eugenides in 1998, expressing concerns that the script lacked "the necessary support around that story, which of course means the boys, the passage of time, the disjunctive narrative, and the *right tone*." (She also includes a recent message that Eugenides wrote in response to her request to print the letter, in which he says, "What a whiny little bitch I was in those days.") The film premièred at the Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim, but, according to Coppola, her American distributor, Paramount Classics, did little to promote it. "They thought teen-age girls were going to kill themselves if they saw it," she said, adding, "It barely came out here."

Coppola told me that every film she makes is a reaction to the one before. After "Virgin," she wanted to work from an original story. She considers "Lost in Translation," her next film, to be her most personal. She chose Japan as its setting based on trips she'd taken to promote her Milkfed line, and came up with the story of a twentysomething American woman, Charlotte, who bonds with a famous older actor named Bob at the Park Hyatt Tokyo. She wrote the script with Bill Murray in mind as Bob, then spent a year trying to track him down. (The actress Rashida Jones, a friend and collaborator of Coppola's, recalled, "She had an assistant whose job it was to hold her phone and tell her if Bill Murray called.") Charlotte, played by Scarlett Johansson, is smart but lacking direction. She tells Bob, "I tried taking pictures, but they're so mediocre." She is married to a hot-shot music photographer (Giovanni Ribisi), and she sits bored at the hotel bar as he schmoozes with Hollywood types.

At the time, Coppola was married to the director Spike Jonze, whom she'd met in the early nineties through her friends Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore, of the band Sonic Youth. But the two were in the process of separating. Jonze released his own feature directorial début, "Being John Malkovich," the same year that "The Virgin Suicides" premièred, and while Coppola's film had a modest return his became an indie sensation. She recalled feeling, in their relationship, an echo of her mother's experiences. Jonze and a few of his friends had discussed launching a directors' collective, and, according to Coppola, they didn't even invite her to join. "I don't want to embarrass Spike and those guys," she said. "I think it's just about understanding the dynamic there, which was a very nineties, dudes'-club dynamic. I was going around with Spike to promote his films, and I was just kind of the wife." (Jonze could not be reached for comment.)

"Slowly move into the pose that everyone can do except Ron."

She was surprised when "Lost in Translation" became a runaway hit, not only winning her an Oscar but earning more than a hundred million dollars worldwide on a four-million-dollar budget. "I thought I was writing this really indulgent piece," she recalled. "I mean, who cares about some rich girl trying to find herself?" But audiences connected to the film's fuzzed-out mood of dislocation and the tragicomic pleasures of two lost people finding each other for a moment in time. At the end of the film, Bob and Charlotte share a kiss, and he whispers something inaudible into her ear. "I never even wrote that line," Coppola said. "Bill always said that it was something that should stay between them."

"What happened to your signature look?"

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There is an adage in Hollywood that actors want to win awards to boost their egos, whereas directors want to win awards to boost their budgets. After "Lost in Translation," Coppola found herself courted by the major studios. The producer Amy Pascal, who was a top executive at Sony Pictures at the time, told me, "I was *desperate* to work with her." When they met, in 2014, she asked Coppola what project she dreamed of making. Coppola answered immediately: "Marie Antoinette."

Not long after the release of "The Virgin Suicides," Coppola had read an advance copy of a biography of the French queen, by the British historian Antonia Fraser, and had written to Fraser asking to option it. "I know I will be able to express how a girl experiences the grandeur of a palace, the clothes, parties, rivals, and ultimately having to grow up," she wrote. "I can identify with her role of coming from a strong family and fighting for her own identity." At first, Coppola endeavored to make her script biographically comprehensive, covering Marie Antoinette's life all the way up to the guillotine. Fraser, writing later in *Vanity Fair*, recalled telling Coppola that the script seemed to lose energy in its final act, as if Coppola had been uninterested in "the mature woman's tragic fate." Fraser went on, "When she asked me lightly, 'Would it matter if I leave out the politics?,' I replied with absolute honesty, 'Marie Antoinette would have adored that.'"

Coppola's film, released in 2006, tells the story of the profligate, unfeeling monarch from the history textbooks as an intimate coming of age, following her from the time she was shipped to Versailles from her home in Austria as a fourteen-year-old peace offering between nations to her departure from the palace, nineteen years later, as the French Revolution set in. Coppola told me that she wanted to capture the idea of "the kids taking over the kingdom." She allowed Dunst to retain her American accent and filled the film with anachronistic music and energetic montages, including a feverish shopping scene set to a remix of "I Want Candy." (Roman, her brother, who shot most of the film's closeups, planted a pair of Converse sneakers among the rococo mules.) When an angry mob grumbles about the queen's infamous (and likely apocryphal) line "Let them eat cake," Dunst tells her girlfriends, "That's such nonsense, I would never say that!" The movie is almost obscenely beautiful; every shot has the composed lusciousness of a box of petits fours. The bracing opening sequence—Coppola has never missed on an opening shot—was inspired by a Guy Bourdin photograph of a model in repose: lounging in a petticoat, with an attendant massaging her feet, Dunst's Marie swipes her finger through the frosting of a layer cake and then delivers the camera an insolent stare. When Coppola showed her father an early cut of the film, he advised her to give Louis XVI more lines. Like Eugenides, he was missing the male perspective. "I was, like, 'Um, Dad, no,'" Coppola remembered, adding, "I honestly don't care about anyone else's point of view. Just hers."

Coppola and Mars began dating during the film's making. Mars, who was born and raised in the town of Versailles, recalled, "It's like living in a museum. You can't disturb anything. It's not welcome." With "Marie," there was excitement in seeing Versailles "embrace something new." But not all French people appreciated the result. At a press screening at Cannes, some viewers booed. Many critics dismissed the movie as an ahistorical powder puff, an impudent exercise in vibes-first filmmaking. Others thought it was a masterpiece. The response was so divided that the *Times* made an unorthodox decision to publish duelling reviews from its two chief movie critics. Manohla Dargis, in the "anti" camp, wrote, "The princess lived in a bubble, and it's from inside that bubble Ms. Coppola tells her story." For some, though, the film's reception only reinforced Coppola's claim to its thematic substance, as a

PANDORA'S BOX OF WINE

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woman who knows a thing or two about the distorting effects of public exposure. (One of her close friends, the fashion designer Marc Jacobs, told me, "It's so easy to throw around these titles like 'nepo baby.' What do you do, *kill yourself* because you come from a good family? Do you just not make art?") Roger Ebert saw the movie's slim perspective as a strength: "Every criticism I have read of this film would alter its fragile magic and reduce its romantic and tragic poignancy to the level of an instructional film."

How one feels about Coppola's narrow approach to storytelling might depend, in part, on where one stands in relation to her field of vision. When "Lost in Translation" came out, some Asian and Asian American critics took issue with the film's depiction of Japanese culture through the eyes of Western visitors. Accented English was played in the movie for laughs. Tokyo establishments were portrayed as "superficial, inappropriately erotic, or unintelligible," as Homay King, a film-studies professor at Bryn Mawr, wrote in *Film Quarterly*. King wondered what level of awareness Coppola had brought to this portrayal: Did the tone of bewildered Orientalism belong to her characters or to her? Coppola defended her depiction to the Los Angeles *Times* by saying, "My story is about Americans in Tokyo. After all, that's all I know." But she didn't seem to reckon with the inherent sensitivities of depicting another culture from a distance. "I did wonder if all the 'r' and 'l' switching would be offensive," she said back then. "But my crew thought it was funny." ("It was a different time," she told me. "I haven't thought about how I would approach it now, but probably not in the same way.")

Coppola confronted a similar backlash more recently, to a movie set on American soil. "The Beguiled," from 2017, is a remake of a 1971 movie that takes place during the Civil War, about a group of white Confederate women who are driven into an erotic fervor when a wounded Union soldier arrives at their boarding school in an isolated mansion. Both the original film and the novel on which it is based also feature an enslaved Black woman who works in the house. Coppola, fearful of perpetuating stereotypes, decided to omit the character altogether, and explained away the absence with dialogue at the beginning of the film: it was nearing the end of the war, and "the slaves left." In the U.S., the release was dominated by discourse about the character's erasure; at Slate, the writer Corey Atad lambasted the film for its "whitewashing of slavery."

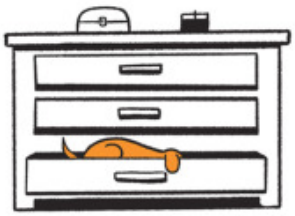
The fallout forced Coppola to consider that there are hazards to writing only what you know, or "leaving out the politics," if doing so means waving away inconvenient complexities. The critic Angelica Jade Bastién, of *New York* and Vulture, told me, "What Coppola does best is also her greatest weakness: she creates fables about modern white femininity." She went on, "Art is political whether the artist wants it to be or not. Coppola is someone studying whiteness, but who doesn't perhaps understand her own whiteness very well. It is because of that contradiction that her work doesn't get deeper." Coppola told me, "I admit it was probably stupid to do something on the Civil War." But she also suggested that her "creative license" with the source material had been "misinterpreted as insulting." She'd been interested in portraying the unravelling of a group of cossetted women when there were no men around or slaves left to tend to them. "It's the kind of world I like, really claustrophobic," she said, adding, "They were so used to being taken care of, and they didn't know how to do anything for themselves."

During one conversation, Coppola confessed, "Sometimes I feel like I make the same film over and over, and I'm probably becoming a cliché of myself." In some ways, "Priscilla" resembles her previous movies, but in contrast to a film like "Marie Antoinette," with its baubles and brocades, the new film is strikingly joyless in its depiction of life inside a gilded cage.

In part because Coppola was denied the rights to Elvis's music, the exuberance of rock and roll is all but absent from the film. Priscilla interacts with Elvis mostly at home, where he's dressed down, needy, and sporadically abusive. Through the murmurings of tertiary characters, Coppola laces the film with reminders of Priscilla's tender age, which was troubling even if you believe, as Presley claimed in her book, that she and Elvis did not consummate their relationship until they were married, when she was twenty-one. One of the film's strongest sequences shows Spaeny trying to occupy herself in Graceland while Elvis is away. She ambles around in a doll-like white dress and too-big matching heels. She tries out various seats in the living room and plunks a single key on Elvis's baby grand. She is less a kid taking over the kingdom than a child left home alone.

Just as Coppola rarely concerns herself with events beyond her characters' sequestered worlds, she doesn't show what happens to the ones who escape the waiting room of their lives. The final shot of "Priscilla" shows Spaeny driving out of the gates of Graceland. We hear Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," both mournful and triumphant. Coppola has hinted at a desire to, as she put it in one interview, "grow up and do other subject matter," beyond adolescence, but she gave me little sense of what that might look like, besides, perhaps, teaming up again with Dunst, who is now in her early forties. Coppola's past films have romanticized the bonds between famous older men and younger women, but she told me that her attitude about such connections has shifted with the times. Her project before "Priscilla," "On the Rocks," from 2020, centered on a forty-ish writer, Laura (Rashida Jones, who is the daughter of the music producer Quincy Jones), and her big-time art-dealer dad, Felix (Bill Murray). The character of Felix, whom Coppola said she based on her "dada and his buddies," is a gregarious man of style, who wears silk scarves and considers caviar a road snack. He is also an attention hog prone to errant flirting and chauvinist soliloquies. "Somewhere" was tinged with nostalgic sweetness about fathers and daughters: Coppola had the film's protagonists—the divorcé movie star Johnny Marco (Stephen Dorff) and his eleven-year-old, Cleo (Elle Fanning)—order every flavor of gelato from room service, "which is just the sort of thing my dad would do," and enlisted the Chateau Marmont's late "singing waiter" Romulo Laki to serenade Cleo with Elvis's "(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear," the same song that Laki used to sing to Sofia when she was young. "On the Rocks," by contrast, is both funnier and pricklier, charting Laura's struggle to define herself outside of her dad's overwhelming orbit. Drinking a Martini at Bemelmans, Felix tells Laura that he is going deaf to the frequency of female voices. Laura yells at the end of the film, "You have daughters and granddaughters, so you'd better start figuring out how to hear them!"

Eleanor has often shot behind-the-scenes footage on Sofia's films, as she did for Francis. She has eighty hours from the making of "Marie Antoinette," which Sofia told me she's helping turn into a documentary. In 2016, at the age of eighty, Eleanor also released her first feature, a comedy called "Paris Can Wait," becoming the oldest American woman to make a directorial début. But lately Eleanor has been ill, and the family has been shuttling back and forth to her bedside in California. On Sofia's birthday last year, which coincided with Mother's Day, the two "sat in the hospital and ate tuna sandwiches," Eleanor told me. Last October, "Priscilla" had its American première at the New York Film Festival. The strikes in Hollywood meant that there were almost no actors on the red carpets, but, because "Priscilla" involved no major-studio funding, Coppola was among the few directors given special dispensation to have her film's stars do promotion. Elordi and Spaeny were at the première, but Coppola herself was missing. Henley, her producer, read a statement in her stead: "I'm so sorry to not be there with you, but I'm with my mother, to whom this film is dedicated."



One recent evening, hundreds of Coppola fans lined up at a Barnes & Noble in central L.A. for an "Archive" book signing. Coppola is, as her daughters recently informed her, "big on TikTok," and some Gen Z fans have taken to calling her "Mother," an influencer to the influencers. (One viral video shows a young woman ranting about cleaning her room: "When a boy's room is messy, it's, like, 'Oh, my God, he's filthy,'" she says, adding, "When a girl's room is messy? It's *Sofia Coppola*.") At the bookstore, the crowd was largely made up of teen-agers, many of whom had donned costumes: gossamer pink tutus and oversized hair bows that evoked Marie Antoinette's style; chokers with heart pendants like one Spaeny wears in the "Priscilla" trailer. One wore a vintage T-shirt by Milkfed, Coppola's fashion line, which she sold years ago but which has, in recent years, become a cult brand among a new generation of fans, including the pop star Olivia Rodrigo.

A young woman wearing a skirt custom-printed with a still from "The Virgin Suicides" reached the front of the line and held her hand to her chest. "You literally invented 'aesthetic,'" she said to Coppola, using slang for the kind of exquisitely curated look that teens strive for on social media. There was an amusing mismatch between the fans' gushing and Coppola's low-key energy. She did not say much more than a warm "oh, thank you" or "that's so sweet" as she received their compliments.

Leaving the bookstore, at dusk, Coppola said that she was looking forward to ordering room service at the Beverly Hills Hotel, whose menu she knew from childhood breakfasts spent talking filmmaking there with her father. (The eggs Benedict is apparently first-rate.) We walked together toward a black car waiting for her at the curb. After the harsh fluorescent lighting in the bookstore, the L.A. streets looked pleasingly subdued. I pointed at the sunset, which was a shade of powdery pink.

"Oh, yeah," Coppola said, her eyes moving lackadaisically toward the sky. "It's a little like I directed it." ♦

LETTER FROM SPAIN

CAVE WOMAN

Beatriz Flamini liked solitude so much that she decided to live underground for five hundred days.

BY D. T. MAX

When Beatriz Flamini was growing up, in Madrid, she spent a lot of time alone in her bedroom. "I really liked being there," she says. She'd read books to her dolls and write on a chalkboard while giving them lessons in math or history. As she got older, she told me, she sometimes imagined being a professor like Indiana Jones: the kind who slipped away from the classroom to "be who he really was."

In the early nineteen-nineties, while Flamini was studying to be a sports instructor, she visited a cave for the first time. She and a friend drove north of Madrid to El Reguerillo, a cavern known for its paleolithic engravings. "We stayed until Sunday and came out only because we had classes and work," Flamini recalls. El Reguerillo was dark but cozy, and inside its walls she experienced an overwhelming sense of love. "There were no words for what I felt," she says.

After graduating, Flamini taught aerobics in Madrid. She was admired for her charisma and commitment. "Everyone wanted me for their classes," she says. "They fought over me." By the time she turned forty, in 2013, she had a partner, a car, and a house. But she felt unsatisfied. She didn't really care about financial stability, and, unlike most people she knew, she didn't want children. She experienced an existential crisis. "You know you're going to die—today, tomorrow, within fifty years," Flamini told herself. "What is it that you want to do with your life before that happens?" The immediate answer, she remembers, was to "grab my knapsack and go and live in the mountains."

Flamini moved to the Sierra de Gredos, in central Spain, where she worked as a caretaker at a mountain refuge. She became certified in safety protocols for working on tall structures, and she learned first-aid skills, specializing in retrieving people from deep crevices and other perilous locations. Speed and precision were crucial. She told me, "After a fall, the short elastic cords of the harness hold you in place. They act like a tourniquet. You have twenty minutes to get out." She sliced the air sideways to indicate what followed if you didn't: amputation. Flamini was also an avid climber and hiker, and she told me that she'd once helped save someone who'd been buried by an avalanche. Another time, she witnessed the death of a hiker who'd been struck by lightning. "There's nothing you can do," she recalls.

Flamini found her work arduous but satisfying. She had moments of intense intimacy with other people but spent most of her time by herself. She even fell out of touch with her family. Flamini began living in a camper van and loved it, especially in the winter, when the doors occasionally froze shut, leaving her trapped inside until the temperature rose. "There were times when I'd be stuck in there for three days, waiting," she says. To get warm, she'd turn on a small stove in the back of the van; if it was too cold for the stove to work, she'd cocoon herself in blankets, alternating between reading and sleeping.

The outside world wouldn't always leave her alone. Twice, thieves tried to break into her camper while she was elsewhere in the mountains. After the second attempt, she told me, she dented the side panel of her vehicle—"four kicks, *pow-pow-pow-pow*"—because "no one would bother a car like that."

Flamini, an enthusiastic photographer, was proud of her mountain adventures, and she maintained an Instagram feed full of her exploits in rugged locales. "I didn't do it out of narcissism," she told me. "I expressed what I felt." Sometimes she posted photographs that other people took of her. In one image, she is dangling by a purple guide rope hundreds of feet above a rocky cliff bottom. "Coming from where I've been lets me decide where I'm going," she wrote. Her signature hashtag was #autosuficiencia ("self-sufficiency"). She enjoyed social-media interactions: she presented herself the way she wished to be and could ignore responses that made her uneasy.

When the pandemic arrived, in 2020, Flamini drove her camper to the mountains of Catalonia and set herself up in an abandoned pre-Romanesque hermitage. She told me that she loved "its cemetery, its rows of dead, dusk falling," adding, "It's a tranquil place." Flamini would speak on the phone to an old friend and hear how bad the COVID-19 situation was in Madrid; then she'd go hiking among wolves.

In July, 2021, just after lockdowns in Spain ended, Flamini thought about coming down from the mountains. But her real desire was to go somewhere more remote: the Gobi Desert, in Mongolia. Only one European had ever crossed it alone on foot, she'd learned. She moved to northern Spain and began training for the Gobi expedition by hiking steep mountain trails while carrying a backpack weighed down by bottles filled with water. She soon decided that she was prepared physically—she could carry twice her weight at six thousand feet—but not mentally. The longest stretch she'd ever spent alone was ninety-five days, in the Cantabrian Mountains. (A passing shepherd had told her to go home.)

Flamini thought about test runs that might prepare her for the extended solitude of the Mongolian desert. Spending time in a cave, she decided, could provide useful lessons in endurance and focus. She'd gone spelunking numerous times since El Reguerillo, and in the late nineties she'd spent longer stints

The cave, in Andalusia, was protected by a drop exceeding two hundred feet. Animals and people couldn't stray in.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTOINE COSSÉ

with groups of cave explorers, serving as their photographer. She'd never had a bad time in a cave.

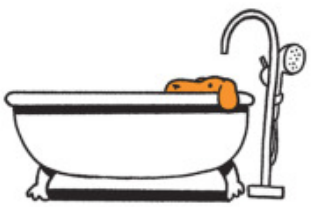
She read on the Internet about people who had survived in caves for extended periods. The modern record was four hundred and sixty-three days. It had been set in 1970 by Milutin Veljković, a Serbian man who had gone underground near the town of Svrljig. But nobody had inhabited a cave in the way Flamini was envisaging. "They either wore a watch or talked on the phone every day," she told me. "Or their families brought them food, or they had a pet for company." Veljković, for example, had remained in contact with his nearby village, thanks to a phone with an extremely long cord, and he kept up with world events by listening to the radio. Flamini decided to not only beat Veljković's record but do it in a way that felt right to her. She recalls settling on "five hundred days, just to round it up—because I knew I could, I just knew it."

Given that *autosuficiencia* was Flamini's watchword, she initially imagined that she would identify a cave in Spain that had never had human visitors, bring down more than a year's worth of food and water, and come back up when she'd consumed it all. Then she'd buy that ticket to Mongolia. But when Flamini sought advice from experienced spelunkers, they told her that it was impossible to furnish a cave for five hundred days in one go—she'd need two thousand rations and more than two hundred and fifty gallons of water. Moreover, how would she get garbage out without seeing daylight? She would need a team to help her. And, once accomplished spelunkers got involved, it would be against their safety codes to allow her to remain underground by herself with no recourse in case of an emergency.

Flamini had not built a life of compromise, but she saw that in this instance some concessions would be necessary. She consented to the installation of two security cameras, a panic button, and a computer at the cave site, for sending one-way communications to people aboveground. To allow for the transmission of data, a Wi-Fi router would have to be installed as well. But Flamini would not take any device that permitted someone to send messages back or to otherwise have real-time contact with her. This left her at some degree of risk: she could break a leg out of reach of the panic button or the cameras and be unable to summon help. But she accepted—even welcomed—the danger in the scenario. She tried to visualize contending with a catastrophe: "how to stay calm in the face of pain, in the face of desperation, as death draws near."

Her basic goal remained intact: to neither see nor speak to another human being for five hundred days. She didn't even want to see her own face. "I wanted total disconnection," she says. If her expedition worked as planned, it would feel somewhat like spending a year and a half inside a sensory-deprivation tank.

She got in touch with a spelunking club near Granada that knew of an ideal cave in the mountains north of Motril, a town overlooking the Andalusian coast. The cave was humid but not wet, and it stayed a habitable temperature year-round. It was protected by a drop near its entrance exceeding two hundred feet: amorous teen-agers, or foxes or weasels looking for shelter, couldn't stray in. At the cave's base was a long gallery that was about a hundred feet by thirty feet, with a ceiling forty feet high. Though the space was the size of a luxury loft, it was dark and dank, and the floor was covered in un-



even rock shards. The group offered to resupply Flamini via a natural shelf midway down the vertical drop: volunteers from Motril could go down with necessities, and she could then climb up by rope to get them. The volunteers would also monitor her well-being, and rescue her if she became seriously ill. A catering company offered to donate precooked food and deliver it for the course of the expedition.

Flamini packed a lot of clothes; she was curious to see how different fabrics would fare in the underground air. She added a toothbrush and unscented deodorant. She also decided to bring a stick—her "Harry Potter wand," as she called it—which she had kept in her van, for luck, and two stuffed toys: a little bear and a witch. She promised herself that she would not treat them as confidants in the cave. As she explained to me, "I did not want a Wilson"—a reference to the volleyball that becomes Tom Hanks's sole companion in the 2000 film "Cast Away." She was not looking for surrogate company. "I was going to be my *own* Wilson," she told me. "Those kinds of conversations—I wanted to have them only with myself. 'What should we eat today?' 'What seems appealing?' 'Look, we'll have beans.' 'No, I don't want beans.' 'Come on!' 'O.K.' *Everything* inside my head."

Though Flamini had devised an idiosyncratic and deeply personal experiment, she realized that the extremity of the exercise would be of interest to others. She invited researchers at two institutions in Andalusia—the University of Granada and the University of Almería—to monitor her during her prolonged isolation in the dark, in case it could prove beneficial to science. After all, humans might one day travel in space capsules to Mars. The academics were excited by Flamini's idea, and agreed to collect and analyze data from her experience. The scientists would focus on different aspects of her physical and psychological state: how her cognitive skills fared under extended pressure; how living in darkness affected her circadian rhythms; how she made sense of any mental decline. Julio Santiago, an experimental psychologist at Granada, who planned to examine changes in Flamini's temporal and spatial perceptions, told me, "You don't very often find someone who *wants* to be isolated and disoriented like this." The scientists subjected her to a battery of interviews and preliminary tests, and gave her a bracelet that would track her circadian rhythms, by measuring her distal body temperature and determining whether she was lying down or standing. To further prepare for the adventure, Flamini met with Débora

Godoy Izquierdo, a sports psychologist. Godoy gave her tips on how to recognize hallucinations, so that she wouldn't be scared by them, and encouraged her to verbalize her thoughts while in the cave, to give herself a greater sense of reality.

María Dolores Roldán-Tapia, a neuropsychologist at Almería, invited Flamini to visit her laboratory for two days. Flamini, wearing skin sensors and a virtual-reality headset, guided a spaceship and searched for planets while dealing with mechanical breakdowns and overcoming other hurdles. These simulations helped establish her baseline states, from stress and surprise to boredom and fatigue. In addition, Roldán-Tapia gave Flamini something called the Iowa Gambling Task, in which a subject chooses cards from a set of decks. The goal is to infer which decks are more advantageous than the others and thereby maximize winnings. Flamini scored well, winding up with fifty dollars in thirty minutes. Roldán-Tapia found Flamini "a very decisive person—very motivated and disciplined."

Flamini also invited Dokumalia, a Spanish production company that specializes in outdoor-adventure series, to create a video record of her experience. Dokumalia provided her with two GoPro cameras, whose screens had been removed, to make a diary of her time in the cave. The footage could be mined by both Dokumalia and the scientists. Electricity would be supplied by solar-charged batteries sent down the vertical shaft with other provisions, allowing Flamini to turn on a couple of lights, and the Wi-Fi router would be placed on a wall at the bottom of the shaft. Flamini gave her project the name Time Cave.

In mid-November, 2021, Flamini posted on Instagram, "On Saturday, November 20th, the boat sets sail again," adding coyly, "We'll be in touch again in April/May 2023." By this point, the Motril volunteers had cleared a space for a helicopter to land by the cave's mouth, in case an emergency evacuation became necessary. In a nod to the many people who were helping her now, Flamini added, "#ni_sola_ni_en_autosuficiencia"—"neither alone nor in self-sufficiency."

When it came time to descend, she and a small group of volunteers gathered at the cave's mouth. Joy and anxiety flitted across her face, as though she wasn't sure if she was going on vacation or to jail. Using her phone a final time, she left a voice mail for a friend who had wanted to wish her well; her eyes glistened as she said, "Enjoy the Internet and Pinterest and your videos. Thanks for crossing my path."

She put on a spelunking helmet, slung a large duffelbag on her back, hooked a carabiner to a guide rope, and prepared to rappel down the vertical shaft. The cave's opening was such a small slit that Flamini had to struggle to fit inside. As she lowered herself down the long, narrow chute, she looked up at the volunteers, stuck out her tongue, and joked, "See you in just a night."

Her Instagram account was silent for the next five hundred days.

"Forty-minute wait in the next dimension. I say we just stay here."

• •

I first met Flamini in May, 2023, at the Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro Majadahonda, in a suburb northwest of Madrid. She had emerged from the cave on April 14th, almost exactly five hundred days after she'd entered it. "Who bought the beers last Friday?" she had joked on exiting. The baby fat on her cheeks was gone—she had lost twelve pounds—but the sparkle in her brown eyes was still there.

The initial impression she gave off was that her stay on the cave floor had been a breeze. At a press conference, she described her time in the cave as "excellent" and "unbeatable," and she told me that she'd enjoyed the experience so much that she had "left the cave singing." She had read dozens of books, drawn pictures, knit hats, and exercised—it could practically be called a staycation. Underground, she had turned forty-nine, and then fifty, alone, but she told me that she'd never really celebrated her birthday anyway. "My mother loved it—she could save money," Flamini joked.

Some professional spelunkers had expressed incredulity at the notion that the experience had been easy. They'd looked for holes in Flamini's narrative. A veteran caver named Miguel Caramés told the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* that he would never attempt such an adventure "in the

most inhospitable environment a human can experience" and urged Flamini to "explain with more detail the logistics of the challenge." Others dismissed the stay as a stunt. As one extreme-sports authority pointed out to me, "The fact of being in a cave doesn't turn you into an expert spelunker." (Flamini has always acknowledged that she is not a caving expert.)

On Instagram, she posted a list of favorite songs that she'd played in the cave, among them tracks by Joe Bonamassa and Jon Bon Jovi. All told, her story felt like a heightened version of many people's lives during the pandemic—which she hadn't even known had receded until she resurfaced. Her cave adventure seemed to suggest that humans were naturally resilient and built to survive.

In the hospital, Flamini was ebullient as doctors ran tests on her. "Blood pressure, normal—nutritional levels, ideal," she told me. "Electrocardiogram perfect. And the psychiatrists said nothing was wrong." She laughed and said, "Everyone thought I'd come out a zombie, but no!"

She had on the same sunglasses that she had worn after emerging from the cave, and they gave her a glamorous Alpine look. I noticed that she walked unevenly, and that she was stooped. She told me that her balance was still off after five hundred days in a place where normal walking wasn't possible, and that her pupils hadn't yet readjusted to bright light. And there had been other detrimental effects. Her short-term memory, she admitted, had become dodgy in the cave, and remained so. She had also lost much of her peripheral vision while underground; a friend had driven her to the hospital on the day we met, because she couldn't drive safely yet. Flamini noted, "Sudden noises from the back frighten me—anything that comes at me without my seeing it." In the cave, she explained, there had been no light beyond that of her camping lamps. Most of the time she just wore a headlamp, meaning that she mostly saw only what was directly in front of her. "I spent a *lot* of time looking that way," she said.

We drove twenty miles north, to Moralzarzal, a small town in the foothills of the Guadarrama Mountains. At first, she'd suggested having lunch at a Japanese restaurant, but she'd forgotten that Moralzarzal didn't have one. We settled on a place with typical Spanish food, at the intersection of two busy roads.

I asked her, in Spanish, if she wanted to sit outside, thinking that she must have had enough of interiors. She said, "*Me da igual*"—"It doesn't matter." We wound up at a table by a large window, watching cars whiz past. She explained that she was staying with friends nearby while she underwent the series of evaluations at the hospital. She liked the suburban hospital more than those in Madrid because Moralzarzal was green and its residents "ran and biked and skated."

Flamini told me that she had enjoyed her time in the cave so much that she had not wanted to leave. She often felt nostalgic about a ritual that she had performed underground: before going to bed, she would turn the panic button on and off, to let her minders know that her imminent inactivity would mean only that she was asleep. In the cave, Flamini said, she'd experienced the overwhelming love that she had first felt in El Reguerillo.

I asked her what she'd missed down below, and she told me roast chicken with French fries—"the kind where you can soak the bread and the potatoes in the sauce." The caterer had sent down decent food, but never that. Over all, she insisted, the time had passed quickly: "For me, it was just a moment—a single night. I didn't have time to miss anyone." In a vibrant, emotive voice, she spoke about her happiness underground so adamantly, and repeatedly, that it was a little hard to believe.

After lunch, we had coffee outside the house where she was staying, a low stucco home with a garden. "It's a magical place," Flamini said, as she led me to an arbor where birds were chirping. She did not know bird sounds very well, she told me, but she had a sixth sense for when a bear or a wolf was nearby. Her hosts, rock climbers who knew her habits, had lent her a van to sleep in.

In the back of the van, she showed me a kitchen area, where she was storing clothes; there were also various *cacharritos*—cheap tools, such as pots and pans, that gave her a pleasurable feeling of *autosuficiencia*. "This is way bigger than my van," she noted. "It's a mansion!" (Her own camper was still parked in Motril.) I asked her if she'd seen "Nomadland," the 2020 movie in which Frances McDormand plays a woman who goes from job to job in a camper, but Flamini hadn't heard of it. As we chatted, she said of the van, "Here you don't have to reach for anything. You're nice and toasty. There is no waste." She compared it to how relaxed life in the cave had been.

As the sun moved across the sky and we drank our coffee, I noticed her observations growing more sombre. The cave experience was not something that she "would recommend to anyone," she said, adding, "I didn't exactly lose consciousness, but the darkness saps you of life." She went on, "The solitude, the social uprooting, it consumes you. Or, to put it a better way, you eat—you down nutrients—but you consume yourself." A year and a half in the Motril cave had been survivable, she continued, but if she'd stayed underground for five years she would have died. She had brought down some elastic bands to exercise with, but she had quickly lost the will to use them. "I had a scale for measuring my weight," she remembered. "I would do ten pulls on the bands, and then I'd have to lie down because I had nothing left. I'd wake up and I'd lost weight."

At the beginning, Flamini had written a journal on the computer and shared it with the researchers, but this didn't last. She initially tried to keep track of the passing days, but by the middle of the second month her sense of time had become thoroughly distorted. The scientific experiments also faltered. Before descending, she had promised to use the computer to do the Iowa Gambling Task and other cognitive exercises at regular intervals, but Roldán-Tapia told me that after a couple of weeks Flamini started sending messages "complaining that the computer didn't work." The researcher added, "Then she began making up random or imaginary passwords." The Time Cave group asked the Motril spelunkers to leave a request for Flamini to resume using the computer, but she ignored it.

One time, Flamini, desperate for contact, told a story aloud to the Motril

SKETCHBOOK BY NAVIED MAHDAVIAN

LAST YEAR, I STARTED BURNING ESFAND, OR WILD RUE, WHICH IS SUPPOSED TO WARD OFF THE EVIL EYE. IT IS A RITUAL I TOOK UP TO TEACH MY DAUGHTER ABOUT BEING IRANIAN.
IRANIANS ARE SUPERSTITIOUS. WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, MY PARENTS WOULD DO THINGS LIKE THROW WATER BEFORE TRAVELLING OR PLACE EGGS UNDER THE TIRES OF A NEW CAR.
WE CAN ONLY DO ONE EGG IN THIS ECONOMY.
THE EVIL EYE IS SUPPOSED TO CAUSE MISFORTUNE OR INJURY.
LET'S PROTECT THE BATHROOM NOW.
TYPICALLY, YOU BURN ESFAND WHEN YOU GET GOOD NEWS OR WHEN YOU RECEIVE A COMPLIMENT, WHICH CAN BRING THE EVIL EYE.
YOUR MAMAN JOON* GOT A PROMOTION.
EVIL-EYE TALISMAN
RECEIVING COMPLIMENTS IS SOMETHING THAT I, AS AN ARTIST, AM ALREADY BAD AT.
IT'S STILL ROUGH, OBVIOUSLY.
EVEN THOUGH I, AS AN ARTIST, DESPERATELY WANT THEM.
I'M JUST A BOY STANDING IN FRONT OF A GIRL ASKING HER TO LIKE HIS POST.
I DON'T ACTUALLY BELIEVE IN THE EVIL EYE, BUT I FIND MYSELF AVOIDING COMPLIMENTS MORE THAN USUAL BECAUSE IT WOULD MEAN HAVING TO BURN ESFAND. AND I FIND MYSELF BEING MORE JUDICIOUS IN WHAT GOOD NEWS I SHARE.
IT DOESN'T COUNT IF I JUST TELL YOU THE GOOD NEWS, STANLEY.
IT IS HUMBLING.
NICE PANTS!
SIGH
WHICH IS MAYBE THE POINT.
NERD.
HEW!
Navied

*GRANDMA

team through one of the security cameras—which the volunteers monitored—even though they did not transmit sound. But she never did this again, concluding that it violated the spirit of her pledge of solitude. She told me that she could remember few details of what happened after the first few months. Ninety-five per cent of her time in the cave, she estimated, had been spent just sitting or lying in the darkness or in the dim light from her battery-powered lamps. "I went into hibernation," she said.

Flamini did keep turning on her GoPros, however, and Dokumalia let me watch a bit of the footage. In her first few days underground, you can see her trying to impose order on a new life with no responsibilities. She neatly tends to her campsite, with its kitchen, dining area, sleeping tent, exercise area, and computer station. Each setup is separated by twenty feet or so, to keep her moving. She clearly expects to excel at the challenge before her. Shortly after she goes down, for instance, she uses a set of markers to draw on a stick. "This is to maintain my sense of color," she declares. At one point, she stares into the distance, explaining that she is doing an exercise to preserve her long-range vision.

But the élan fades quickly. Recording herself with one of the GoPros, she notes how hard it is not to know whether it's day or night in the perpetual gloom of the cave. "It's always four in the morning," she complains. As the days pass, her body also grows confused; she sometimes goes three days without signalling to the team that she is going to bed.

The weirdness does not always make her unhappy. "I'm fucked but in love," she brags to the GoPro early in her stay. In another video, she explains that she knows "where I am and what my goals are," adding, "There's no loss of motives for why I'm here." Another time, she is cradling a big silver thermos while wearing a blue down jacket; she theatrically turns toward the walls of her cave and intones, "How handsome you are. You're lovely! And how welcoming! You're kind and full of crickets—I think they're crickets. You're a delight!" In another video, she holds up the thermos and exults, "*Café!*"

The footage takes some surreal turns. While tucked into her sleeping bag, she thinks that she might be hearing drums beating beneath her head, and imagines that some sort of shaman is trying to send her signals of welcome. On what she thinks is day nineteen—she's actually been underground for nearly twice as long—she says to the camera, "I'm convinced that if I get past day thirty it's a done deal!"

Ostensibly, she wants to disconnect from time and its demands, but clues that the seasons are changing keep attracting her attention. Big spiders on the cave's walls disappear and are replaced by baby ones. One day, she has an urge to collect all the stones on the cave floor, and concludes this must mean that it's harvest time aboveground. (In fact, it's summertime.) Flamini considers documenting her menstrual cycle as a way of tracking time, but her period is too irregular to serve as a calendar. The roots of her dyed-red hair grow out, but she has no mirror with which to inspect her new appearance.

Flamini's campsite quickly becomes strewn with clothes, blankets, books, and pots and pans. She wonders aloud what her *autosuficiencia* concept has to do with a project that involves eating hundreds of precooked meals lowered

AERIAL VIEW

People who romanticize an Africa
They've never seen
Like to identify themselves
With lions. It's all roar and hunt,
Quick fucks and blond manes.
People love the word *pride*.
Haven't you seen the parades?
Everybody adores a lion
But me. I want to be a giraffe.
I'm already tall and long-necked.
In the real Sahara, a giraffe beats
A lion's ass every day
On Instagram. I've seen
A giraffe shake the leaping cat
Off its back and toss it like litter.
I've seen a giraffe stomp hooves
Down hard on the lion's face
Before it got the chance
To meow. I want to be a giraffe
And eat greens of every variety
Straight out the tree. I already
Like to get high. Lions need
Animals like us. We need no prey.
I already won't chase anybody
For my food. But maybe
I can still be romantic. Maybe
I can still be romantic in spite
Of my pride. Someone will notice.
Up the sky, not down the street.
You can watch me while I watch you
And the rest of the savanna
From my aerial view. Lord,
Let me get higher. Just one of me
Is a parade.

—Jericho Brown

into her cave by volunteers. Too often, her experience feels to her more like filming reality television than like crossing the Mongolian desert by herself. Suddenly, she offers a hymn of praise to her favorite brand of ready-to-eat food. "They provide a gustatory education!" she gushes. The meals, she jokes, offer a rare sensory rush in an environment where there are no novel flavors or smells, "except for an occasional little fart you let out."

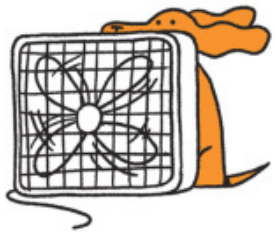
As the months pass, things get bleaker. Flamini battles a persistent fear of the dark, and at many points she seems on the verge of breaking down in tears from the stress. Weeks go by in which she doesn't make a new video. When she does resume recording, it's clear that her resolve is cracking. In the sealed world of the cave, small things cause big irritations, as if she were a passenger stuck in a middle seat during a transoceanic flight. The random noises that at first charmed her, like the shaman's drums, begin to grate. She thinks that the floor of the cave may be moving.

In January, 2022, she starts hearing a strange sound. It resembles a duffelbag being dragged—perhaps it's an animal. In a GoPro video, she urges the Motril team to send down a device with which to document the noise. "This is *not* paranoia," she says to the GoPro. "This is *not* hallucinations." Shortly afterward, her eyes wide with anxiety, she invites the group down to listen and says, "Fuck this shit. If it's an animal, it's a *big* animal. Maybe it fell in. Maybe it got in through a hole. I don't know." She starts sleeping with a knife in her tent.

The members of the Dokumalia team who watched the GoPro footage were disconcerted, as were the scientists for whom she was supposed to perform the computer tests. Some people on the team felt that her apparent auditory hallucinations suggested deep distress, and expressed concerns about her stability. There were discussions about bringing her out of the cave. But Godoy, the sports psychologist, argued that the hallucinations weren't especially troubling, and endorsed the idea that the team simply send down puzzles and more books to help Flamini maintain focus. (Godoy told me that she never shared the others' worries, and believed that Flamini had dealt appropriately with the hallucinations, "even if they might be strange experiences for most people in their daily lives.")

Flamini righted herself, but at times she returned to a psychologically delicate state. In other footage, a swarm of flies has deposited larvae in her food, and she holds back tears as she rubs her eyes in despair. She leaves a note for the Motril volunteers, begging for help. They lower a roll of flypaper onto the rock shelf. She initially planned to make it through the five hundred days without any music, relying on meditation and visualization exercises to calm herself. But soon after she enters the cave she asks for someone to send down an MP3 player that she left with the team. Flamini loves blues music, and her favorite songs help hold back her fear of the dark. (For a while, she sleeps with a light on.) She starts keeping her MP3 player in her first-aid kit.

Soon after her descent, the walls of the cave grow so wet that the Wi-Fi router begins to act up. The Motril spelunkers drop a luminescent bottle through a hole in the cave roof with a handwritten message explaining the problem. The plunk of the bottle hitting the rocks as it comes down the shaft startles Flamini. The message instructs her to go to a corner of the cave where she will not see the spelunkers



coming to replace the router. Nevertheless, as they perform the repair, she can hear them breathing.

After six months or so in the womb of the cave, Flamini succumbed to its rhythms. She stopped trying to track time, because doing so had only added to her anxiety. She became neither hopeful nor despairing. "In the cave, the line of time disappears, and everything floats around you," she told me. " 'A while ago I was born.' 'A while ago I was going to visit Mongolia.' There is no past, there is no future. Everything is present, everything is a while ago, and it's all brutal and strange."

One temporal marker remained. After five defecations, she would carry her waste, in plastic pouches, up to the exchange point, and then hurry back down. "If there was food, I'd bring it," she recalls. "Otherwise, I'd just come back."

Flamini grew achy and stiff—in April, 2022, she complained to the GoPro that she could barely raise her legs. She began spending a large amount of her time in her tent—a cave within a cave. She remembers sleeping for very long stretches, often having vivid dreams. Flamini told me about one in which she imagined herself standing outside the cave. I told her that this reminded me of perhaps the most famous scene in Spanish drama, from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 1635 play, "La Vida Es Sueño." A prince wakes to find that he's locked in a tower; when he asserts that he was once free, he is tricked into believing that it was only a dream, and despairs. Flamini told me that she was actually pleased when she woke up and realized that she was still in the Motril cave: she had not failed in her challenge.

By this stage, Flamini was capable only of sporadic bursts of activity. She drew some cartoons about her experience—one depicted the Time Cave team members picking out books for her at the library—but left out everyone's facial expressions. Whenever she drew herself, she placed a blindfold over her eyes. "I was denying myself," she told me. She knit wool caps for friends. She read the books that the Motril team had got from the library. (They explained to the librarians that the reader was in an unusual place and might need to keep books for longer than the standard loan.) She read sixty titles, though she told me that she recalls almost none of them—one exception was "Endurance," an account of Ernest Shackleton's failed attempt to reach the South Pole, which she had brought with her and read soon after arriving in the cave. Life passed as a series of tamped-down states. There came a moment, she told me, when she

thought that she was dying. It felt like an act not of suicide but of release: "There was no difference between what I was feeling then and what I understand as death."

What kept Flamini going, it seems, were the two GoPros. She needed a Wilson after all. She would curl up with a camera and perform for it against a backdrop of stalactites. She'd smile at the lens and even flirt with it. She'd primp her hair and joke about having a new hair style. And she'd do silly imitations of the bats that moved around the cave, calling them "*pobrecitos*." At one point, she explains to the GoPro how disorienting the passage of time is becoming for her: she's stopped shaving her armpit hair, and has tried to use its length as a proxy, but it doesn't seem to be growing. Is she confused about how long she's been underground, or does a body need light to grow hair? (In fact, hair grows more quickly in the sun.)

Except for a few periods when Flamini was deeply depressed, she rallied herself for the GoPro recordings. The camera confessionals became the underground equivalent of social-media posts: a one-sided substitute for conversation, with a self-presentation that she could shape. In one video, she speaks of her previous life, and notes, "On the mountain, you're alone, but every so often someone appears. Here, I'm really, really alone. Every day I'm happier with myself, and every day the conversations between me and me are more and more friendly. I realized I have a new superpower—I can talk to myself by telepathy."

The replacement Wi-Fi router brought new troubles: she perceived that it was giving off inaudible sonic waves. She began to have headaches. Her sinuses hurt, and her nose began to bleed. Using a security camera, she tried to communicate how bad she felt. David Reyes, the head of the Motril spelunking team, told me, "We saw her in front of the camera for a little while," but, because the camera recorded no sound, "we didn't know what she was saying." In early September, 2022—nearly three hundred days into her adventure—she carried her tent up the shaft, then pitched it right at the cave's exit. She went back down to retrieve food and water, then resurfaced. Six days after she left the cave, Reyes visited the site and discovered her tent. She briefly explained to him what had happened. The exchange compromised one of the key terms of Flamini's self-imposed isolation. While a new router was acquired and installed, she stayed inside the tent. The interlude outside the cave would likely upend her attempt to surpass Veljković's effort, but she was nonetheless determined to return underground and complete five hundred days. After eight days, she went back down.

Her minders noticed that it was difficult for Flamini to regain her equilibrium in the cave. They found her increasingly fixated on the thought that she was almost finished. She became snappish on her GoPro recordings, then apologized for her rudeness, then became snappish again. Two months after her second descent, she recorded a ten-minute harangue in which she accused a Motril team member of changing a knot in the rope used to lower items onto the rock shelf without telling her. "For the love of Christ!" she says. "Being a spelunker isn't a game! This is a serious error!" She wipes her forehead in stress. "How many accidents occur from bullshit like this?" (She later acknowledged to me that she had been the one to re-jigger the knot, and had forgotten about it.) Sonia Jaque, one of the filmmakers at Dokumalia, told me, "We didn't give her outburst any importance, because she was angry about everything during this period."

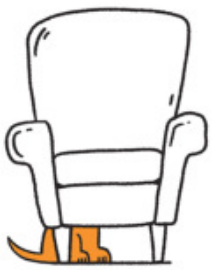
Flamini may have no longer been in love with the cave, but she stayed underground long enough to reach her goal. On the five hundred and eighth day, at 6 P.M., Reyes dropped down into the gallery to tell her that it was finally time to leave. Flamini told me that she was "just drifting off" when he arrived, but his voice roused her. She had saved a package of risotto, which she had fantasized about serving to any guests. She explained to me, "I wanted to say, 'Before we go, would you like something? You're in my home!'" But the Time Cave team was eager to wrap

up the mission. Keeping watch over Flamini had been hard work for everyone. The next day, Reyes helped her gather some of her belongings, leaving behind her tent, her sleeping bag, and her drawings for later retrieval. At 9 A.M., she left the cave singing. Flamini had been reading "Twenty-One Years Among the Papuans," by André Dupeyrat. When I met with her, in May, no one had yet gone back to the cave to get the book or the other personal items that she left on the cave floor.

Flamini had anticipated a quiet exit from the cave, but her tantalizing goodbye on Instagram had reached not just her friends but also Spanish journalists, who were interested to learn more about her attempt to beat Veljković's world record. When she climbed out of the cave's mouth, about a dozen reporters were waiting for her. A few hours later, Flamini gave an impromptu press conference. For someone who had spoken only to herself for a year and a half, she handled the experience surprisingly well. Her grin was even wider than when she'd gone in. Her red hair was pulled back with the kind of headband she'd worn underground. She looked simultaneously anxious and relieved; her face seemed to say that she had just landed on a foreign planet and was glad the inhabitants were so friendly. When a member of the press asked her if there had been a time when she wanted to give up, she replied, "Not once!" Everyone applauded. Some journalists filled her in on major world events that she had missed: Russia had attacked Ukraine; Queen Elizabeth II had died. These were not the types of things that Flamini particularly cared about, so no revelation rattled her. She did lose her cool, however, when a radio journalist later asked her how she had sexually satisfied herself in the cave.

The Time Cave research group was eager to get to work. Flamini had declined to put on a circadian-rhythm bracelet she had originally been given, complaining that it smelled, but shortly after her stint aboveground she'd agreed to wear another one. This gave the researchers some useful data, as did the hundreds of GoPro recordings that she had made.

But, a month or so after emerging, Flamini told the Time Cave researchers, in a WhatsApp video message, that she was putting a halt to participating in any more sessions. Her experience, she reminded them, "was unique in history," and she had to heal in her own way. The scientists could no longer publish anything about her without her explicit permission, she told them. "*We* are the Time Cave team," she said. "*I* am the leader of the team." She had found an agent, and it was clear that she was done giving away her story for free. The researchers, who had put in many hours of work—and had spent nearly as much time worrying about her well-being—were baffled and upset.



In the video message, Flamini appeared very tense, and some Time Cave members saw this as confirmation that she'd had a trying time in the cave and did not want to relive it. (Flamini herself told me that she could not stand to watch the raw GoPro footage.) They guessed that the breakup was a defense mechanism, as was the frenetic positivity of many of her interview responses. (Flamini told me that she has no memory of the press conference.) Shortly after the press conference, she had collapsed. An ambulance came, but instead friends drove her to the hospital a couple of days later. Roldán-Tapia, the neuropsychologist at the University of Almería, spoke with Flamini just before the incident. "What's happened since she left the cave shows all the signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome," Roldán-Tapia told me. "Her survival in the cave was traumatic, even if she entered it of her own free will." She added, "There's a lot of data that makes me think what she experienced there was basically negative." (Because of Flamini's change of heart, Roldán-Tapia and the other researchers could not conduct tests to investigate this hypothesis.)

It appears that Milutin Veljković's record will stand. The tent interlude is an obvious issue. Flamini has nonetheless applied to be designated the female record holder, and a spokesperson for the Guinness Book of Records told me that the application is being considered.

The Time Cave team members still hope to analyze the data that they've collected—whether Flamini's feat is a world record or not, it's still an astonishingly rare experience. The data might provide information on, say, whether survival on the dark side of the moon is possible, or how feasible a long retreat underground would be in the event of a catastrophic nuclear blast. Santiago, the psychologist at the University of Granada, pointed out that Flamini's stay in the cave was analogous to "lots of situations on Earth as well, like living in solitary confinement, or in a station in Antarctica, or in a submarine." He was ready to give Flamini a test to see if alterations in her sense of time had affected her sense of space. "We know the two are closely connected in the human mind," he noted. Somewhat plaintively, Santiago urged me, "Press her to connect with her team again so we can complete our work."

The final time that I communicated with Flamini, by messaging her on WhatsApp, her medical examinations at the hospital continued to be going well. She still maintained that her cave adventure had been a positive experience, because she had more or less achieved her goal. "We extreme-sports people don't do things to suffer," she insisted. "We do it because it feels good." It was clear that she had conquered her fears, like Shackleton, and had defied bourgeois expectations, like Indiana Jones.

Flamini was not sure when she would get to Mongolia. She had lost a lot of muscle mass in the cave, and had regained only some of it. No backer had stepped forward to finance a trip to the Gobi Desert. The documentary had not found funders, either. I wanted to ask Flamini if the whole Motril experience had left her disappointed, but before I could she was off the grid again, driving back to the mountains of Cantabria in her van. Soon, I was following her posts on Instagram once more. One day, she posted, "No es Huir. Es Ser": "It's not Fleeing. It's Being." ♦

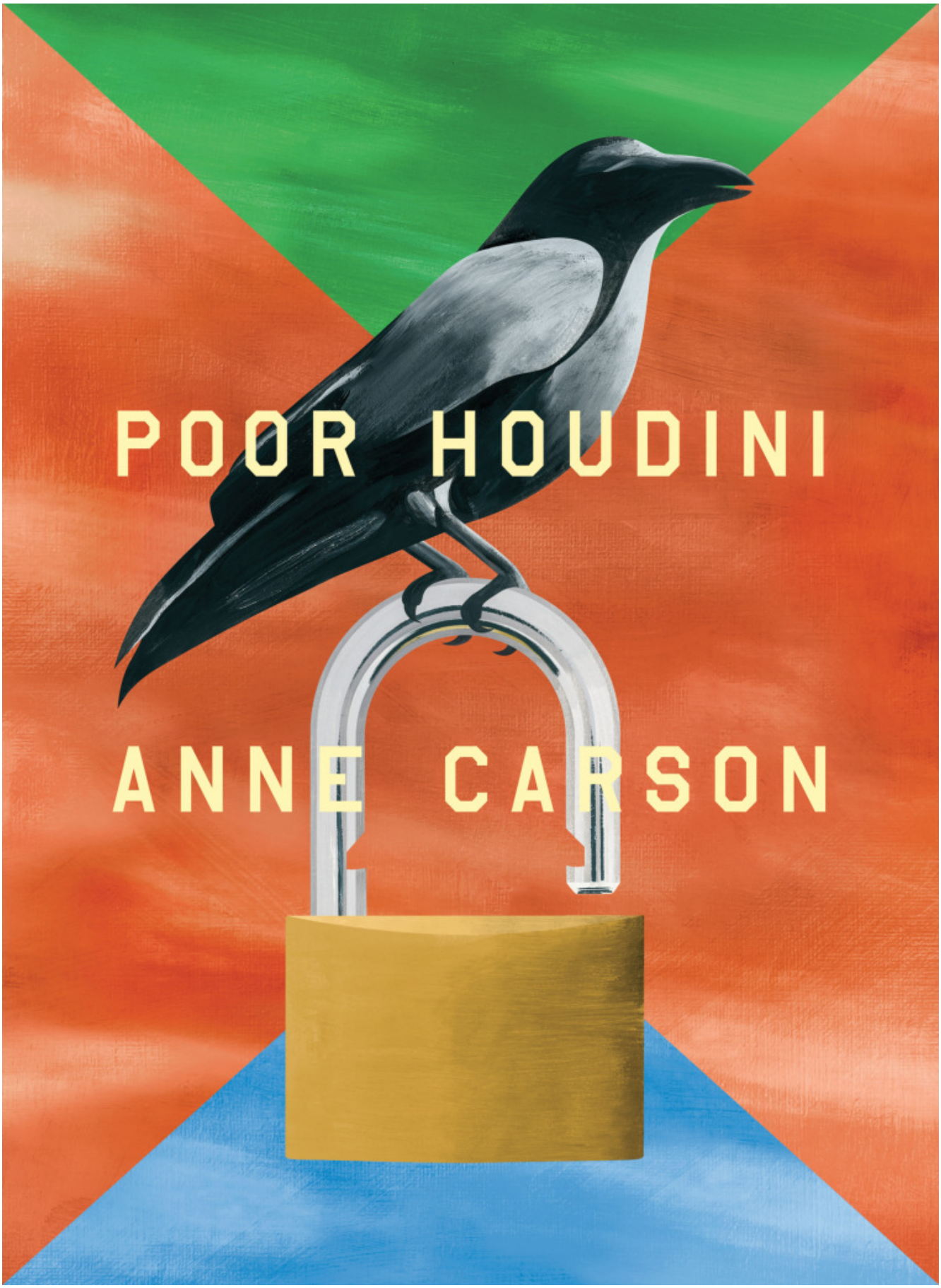


ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN PETERS-COLLAER

Four very thin trees stand above their own reflections and hesitate, as cold girls do. She thinks of rhymes for *girls do. Whirls through. Pearls anew*. Use it in a sonnet? Eddy's mother lives by a lake. It is a gray and glassy evening. Supper was all reminiscences, Eddy recalling slow white mists drifting over the schoolyard each day at five, when the chemical plant incinerated its Styrofoam, and how he broke his collarbone and no one believed him for three days, his mother at the head of the table smiling and continuing with her fruit cup, his brother sitting opposite with his head down, a man tall and thin as a door, closed like a door. He ate as if expecting more. *Four*, *chore*, *whore*, *underscore* ran through her mind perkily. She mumbled something, got up from the table, and left. Now, at the lake, no one swimming, she watches the water slide from slate to black.

What does your brother do? she asks Eddy on the way home, and Eddy says he has three paper routes. Paper routes? A grown man? Isn't he twenty? Says he doesn't need much to live on. And we both got something when the old man died. He lives on that? No, he bought a Bugatti. Shit, where's he keep a Bugatti? Oh, he crashed it or gave it away, I forget. So he stays with your mom? Trailer out back. Where I saw the chickens? Mom would rather he didn't keep chickens. Did you all eat supper together all the time growing up? Yes, he says. She likes the idea of her and Eddy learning about each other's childhood. She starts to tell him about her mother's voice crackling from the intercom every night at six, the meal laid out on plates on the kitchen counter, all of them shuffling off to their rooms with their plates to eat alone. He glances at her vaguely and speeds up to take the ramp onto the highway. They are driving through early-spring croplands. She stares out. The fields look shaved. We had chewing and long silences, he says. It's not much better.

A sentence. Any sentence. Even a single word. She needs to be writing, not writing anything special, just writing. Her mind is a lead patio gleaming from end to end. Thoughts skitter across it like dry leaves, disappear. Ticktock smell of clock. She can't sleep, she can't swallow. She is not, as we say, herself. The crow watches from the yew tree. He knows she knows he knows. Off to your next rot pile, crow! she yells, standing in the kitchen doorway. When Eddy asked her to house-sit, he gave instructions about laying out toast on the back-porch railing every evening. She feels bad that she hasn't done it. The crow is regarding her tightly. Suddenly it drops backward off its branch, turns one full somersault in air and strikes, right side up, on a nearby branch. She stares. The crow does it again. Vaulting to a closer branch. She holds her breath. Crow does it a third time and lands on the porch railing, drilling her with a yellow eye. Dirty business, crows! the crow cries. A laugh breaks from her, which the crow immediately mimics, then they both stop, contemplating this new, complex mood. A long moment passes. Two branches on the yew tree quiver and are still. The crow hops a little way down the railing and back. Hops farther down the railing and back. Few more hops. Does the crow want her to go somewhere? She steps out. Crow clatters off around the corner of the house.

The sunset is a red-gold rumpus on the western sky. It has rained. The crow tosses itself from branch to branch, pole to pole, glistening on its pace, and she follows. They are soon far from where they began, streets unfamiliar to her, an older part of town, crossed by alleys where forms flit. There is the stillness after rain. Rank risings rise. Trees drip. Street lamps loom. Night takes on a polish, a pure power. She glances into windows as she goes. Blaze of an empty kitchen. A man reading. Old Christmas tree in a corner. It feels secret. The sky is clearing overhead. She feels secret, too. She feels tremendous.

Afterward, talking of that night, she can't remember how she found her way, with the darkness complete and the crow no longer visible in upper branches. There was a kind of buzzing at the back of things, she tells Eddy. How she found the woman, how she knew which alley to go down, how she lifted her and carried her out, she couldn't say. Sometimes it happens with these older buildings that a balcony just collapses, she tells him. In the ambulance, she held the woman's hand. Once, the woman opened her eyes and said, They'll give me ginger ale? Yes, she answered. The woman closed her eyes. Opened them again. And ice cream? Yes, surely.

Eddy has a back porch, but he never sits out there. Eddy is a guy you live with? No, just a friend. I worked for him awhile, doing research. Not anymore. Ah. I like him a lot—no, well, I like him sometimes, I don't know. Few weeks ago, I met his brother. And? And I liked his brother, too. I like them both, together, different parts of them, you know? Better than separately—too bad you can't do that, stack up different parts of people and make one good one. Oh, I don't know, it's nice to stay between them—there's a slot for me. Am I being weird? Probably.

They are sitting on the balcony. It has been rebuilt. The day is large and sharp, like the edges of tin cans. It's hot for May, like being at the beach. They lounge back in shady chairs. The woman's name is Vern. Who's Antonioni? she asks Vern. Why do you ask? Eddy mentioned him. Vern says she doesn't like Antonioni, or women in men's movies generally, those taut blondes so bored and terrified, not sure if they're coming or going. Soon she is telling Vern about how she resolved not to go over to Eddy's place anymore unless invited and then went anyway, the stupidity of this, the stupidity of extreme states of being female. Stupidity of tiptoeing around what you want. I don't know what I want. I spill things, she says. Vern says, Want to go get tacos?

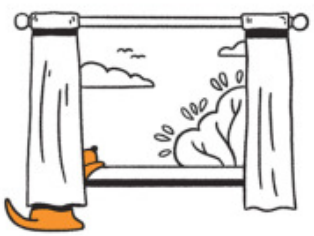
On the way to the taco place, she calls Eddy. He likes tacos. They sit outside. Eddy, this is Vern. Vern, this is Eddy. How was your day? O.K., how was yours? The wind is running its fingers over the trees. Shivering, she watches them. She is curious how this will work, Vern and Eddy. Will he do his tough-guy act? Things tilt when two become three. Vern is opaque. Eddy tells them he found an arm bone today. Eddy is a forensics guy. He was investigating a house. Adult female. Where? Kitchen cupboard. How? What do you mean how? How did it look? Dry, old, polished. Maybe an archeologist lived there, she says. Sharp laugh from Eddy. Yes, maybe so, he says in a funny tone. She wipes salsa from her chin. They talk of porches and tacos and then of writing, because Vern is

writing a book, and Eddy asks did she tell Vern about the sonnets, get some advice? She is shocked, dumb. What is he up to? Does he think he's helping? No, I don't show things to people, she says, people I don't know. She blushes. Don't know well. Vern gives her a clear look. Now there is no step she can take in any direction. She weeps suddenly, stops suddenly, laughs. Sorry! I'm empty. I mean, tired. Today. Inside her chest everything is ablaze.

At the pool, she swims a mile then rests at the wall, watching the rest of the pool doing what Eddy calls "the arm ballet." Arms and hands are idiosyncratic in swimming. An arm can smash or scoop or scythe. A hand can cut the water as a blade or a paddle or a frying pan. Some strokes have a little curled-wrist action at the top, perhaps only on the left. Underwater is a different world. All bodies are beautiful there. They balance like big blue toys outlined in silver bubbles. She glances over at the family pool that lies alongside the lap pool, with shallow water and some steps down to a sort of basin at one end. There, underwater jets create a circling current. She wonders how strong the jets are, what it feels like. Just now she sees five people caught in the current and circling helplessly, looking at one another, as surprised as if they'd burst into flame. Loose evening light falls from high windows, and, as the jets carry them around and around, they seem to be gazing down at their own arms and legs, saying, *Look at us, look, we turned out perfect after all!*

Later that evening, she tries to re-create this for Vern, but it loses voltage in the telling. They end up talking of Eddy, as usual. Then she walks home. Goes past her house. The sky is huge and raw. What do you want from Eddy, really? Vern had asked, and she said, I want him to look me in the face and ask me something. Ask you what? Doesn't matter. That could be disappointing, Vern said. My dad saw Houdini once—did I ever tell you this? He said it was much like you'd expect. They tied him up this way and that way, ropes, cables, locked him in a jail cell, then before you knew it came the sound of bolts dropping to the ground and locks flying off, and the great Houdini emerged. He just came walking out three paces behind the sheriff—and it was nothing! Anticlimax! Where was this? Manistique, Michigan, the county jail. Poor Houdini, she said. You should write a poor Houdini sonnet, Vern said. I hate it when people tell me what I should write, she said. I bet, Vern said. But still.

Some months later, she shows it to Vern, being rather pleased with the line "none of us knew how to wrap a shroud," and Vern says she likes it, so she shows it to Eddy, who says he'll have to read it again, which means, well, she doesn't know what it means. She waits a week. She makes another copy and forgets it in his car, in case he does want to read it again. Another week goes by, nothing. Finally, she asks him. Had a chance to look at my sonnet? Well, he says. Well. The thing is, the swimming part, that part's good, the rest is crap. Epiphanies! You want epiphanies? Five guys got beheaded downtown last night. Don't ask me why—they're imitating ISIS now, who the crazyfuck knows? They're fifteen years old, no one's been to school for years, dictators are everywhere, dictators are *us*, and us grabbing everything, the grabbing is the whole story, everyone's story, everyone who survives. All that bright-light-coming-down-and-all-God's-creatures-are-one-stressed-and-unstressed-fancypants stuff of yours notwithstanding. Put your rubber mask on, girl, and slap down some real sound! Nobody's dancing so far! And the thing is—you want to talk



epiphanies—the thing is, they called me too early. I get there and one of the dead guys isn't dead yet. Beheading's not so simple—you don't master the mechanics off a ten-minute YouTube video. You need a fucking scimitar and the arm strength of an Olympic boxer, you know what I'm saying? I'm saying the neck is a tough old tube of bone and gristle. I'm saying it was a long night.

While he talks, she looks out the window. The crow is on a branch of the yew tree, cocking its head and holding something on one side of its beak, as if to peer at it with the left eye. You used not to let it get to you, she thinks. What happened? Eddy hands her back the page. He turns away. Her head is full of blood and thundering. She goes out to the back porch. Since it is in her hand, she reads the sonnet to the crow. No direct response. The crow is teaching itself how to slice a forked twig from the yew tree into a three-pronged tool for digging grubs out of a tree trunk. If I were you, she says, oh, boy. What a life I'd have. The crow confers on her its sky-filled eye.

Around this time, it seems to her, Eddy gets sadder. No more rants. He gradually vacates himself. When she starts sleeping with his brother, there is no more chitchatting with either of them about the other. The brother's name is James. She calls him James Taylor because his phone message is five seconds from "Up on the Roof." I thought of using that once, she says. Then I didn't.

How much younger is he? asks Vern. I don't know, she answers. And I don't want to know. She tells Vern some of the things he's said: *I have to see you again!*—whispered to her in the driveway that first time they went for supper at his mother's. More hilariously, watching her walk to the bathroom naked one night, *Great, no cellulite!* They form a corner to study him, she and Vern, two girls versus the enemy. Hard to dial that back, she knows, but she needs this friend, this Vern. With James Taylor, she merely needs to keep things in motion. When she falters, he falters, and faltering is uglier for the older one. They have tender ways together (viewing the moon while holding hands) and awkward ways (sex), but best is just lying side by side all night, sleeping and waking, like fishes, he says, moved this way and that by the stream.

Calling Eddy while his brother is in the shower is less exciting than she expects. Eddy had left messages. His sadness foams in her ear. She pats at it. Everyone is aware of what is going on—of course they are. James Taylor comes out of the shower. He is extra tense. They order Chinese. It arrives with three fortune cookies. Is that unlucky? he says in an ashy voice. No, no, she says, no, no.

Eddy's sadness has a hold on her, no

question, but this other thing, the brother, his passion is a scent coming along the ground. She is a hound, nose down, starving for it, trampling herbs and grasses on the track. When he acts young and chaotic, she gets scared, her own reprimands sound to her like those of a faded aunt. They have fights on the phone that leave them gasping. Other times, he quotes the Tao Te Ching at her. I am a patient person, he says, and she says, You are not! They brace and glare, then dissolve laughing—this happens early on. Later, there are hard rocks under the surface.

She fails him in serious ways, he makes clear. You're good at being cold, he says. She has to allow that this is true. You're always thinking up bits for some sonnet, aren't you? You're only half here. Also true. His voice is high and soft with suffering. To feel she has to have pity on him enrages her. She looks at this rage, it feels stony, she cannot move it. The higher and softer his voice, the more she wants to simply be gone from the room. Then comes the night he sees her track and swat a mosquito, initiating a Taoist crisis. His mouth twists aside like a smeared rose. She tries to recall his mouth when he was saying, *I have to see you again*. A small horror knob settles between them.

She doesn't so much think about Eddy as have a constant Eddy-atmosphere in her mind. He's jealous is why he's calling all the time, Vern says. *Jealous*, *airless*, *scare us.* No, I don't think so, she says, but there is a feeling deep down like a detonation. Then Eddy begins asking her friends to intercede. She'll have no good of the guy! he cries at Vern. Vern hangs up on him. The men are reliably startling, aren't they? Vern says to her.

She decides to end it with James Taylor. This proves harder than she thought. She dreams of a sweat-soaked bird working its wings against a hot black night and wakes exhausted. They have several final conversations. Her room smells like adolescence. Sometimes he is calm and noble, giving her bits of Tao. Other times he slopes in her armchair, sobbing. Apologizes for being boring, curses her, sends wild small poems, sends seven-paragraph denunciations, back and forth it goes. She counts the paragraphs to tell Vern. Her wings hang down on either side. She finds a scrap of paper he put in her fridge, in the egg carton. It shows the international distress signal for "DON'T UNDERSTAND." This scrap she doesn't show to Vern. She keeps it for years.

"But, all dopiness aside, what do you do for a living?"

• •

Winter. She gets new headache pills, little red ones, and tries to reconnect with her routine at the university before her research grant runs out. She borrows a lot of movies from the library and watches them with half attention. She goes to a daylong conference on the concept of "panic" and hears how the ancient Greeks dumped the whole hot mess into a god named Pan, saturator of noon and demon of mad space. Late that night, she starts a movie without noticing what it is. Hot dry Sicily washes over her eyes. The characters are dusty and taciturn. Sicily has too much noon. Then it is New Year's Eve, a dance. There is a furiously energetic band, but their sound has been turned off. The dancers, masked, drift around an ugly basement dance hall, out of synch, with some other (wrong) music laid on top, bumping into one another, all covered in a shiny stuff like stardust. The whole thing looks rough, deformed. It is the most beautiful movie she has ever seen. A seated man looks up at a woman swirling past him and opens his mouth in a soundless bark. His eyes tear her open. He is powerless. She swirls on. How do they become people entrusted to one another, entrusted *with* one another, how does anybody? She can smell damp church basement, wool, sweat, Vol de Nuit, cigarette butts, the priest at the back of the room thinking of sin, his greasy winter cassock. Because I trust you I press my body upon yours and we dance, buoyant and scarcely ourselves in clouds of whatever this is, this brightness of Aphrodite's needle as it flashes in and out of living skulls. She deletes the last line. Precious. Who calls love "Aphrodite" nowadays? A sonnet needs a far eye and a close eye at the same time, but gods? No. Anyway, "no results are found" in the online rhyming dictionary. The movie ends. She sits a long while. Turns the TV off. Closes her notebook. Outside a dog cries against the dark. She rises, stiff now, puts on a coat, and goes out. Deep-blue dawn. A whitish gold light is just beginning. Frozen grass underfoot has the soft bristle of walking on a sandwich with lettuce. ♦

BOOKS

ACID REFLUX

When America first went tripping.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

One evening in September of 1957, viewers across America could turn on their television sets and tune in to a CBS broadcast during which a young woman dropped acid. She sat next to a man in a suit: Sidney Cohen, the researcher who had given her the LSD. The woman wore lipstick and nail polish, and her eyes were shining. "I wish I could talk in Technicolor," she said. And, at another point, "I can see the molecules. I . . . I'm part of it. Can't you see it?" "I'm trying," Cohen replied.

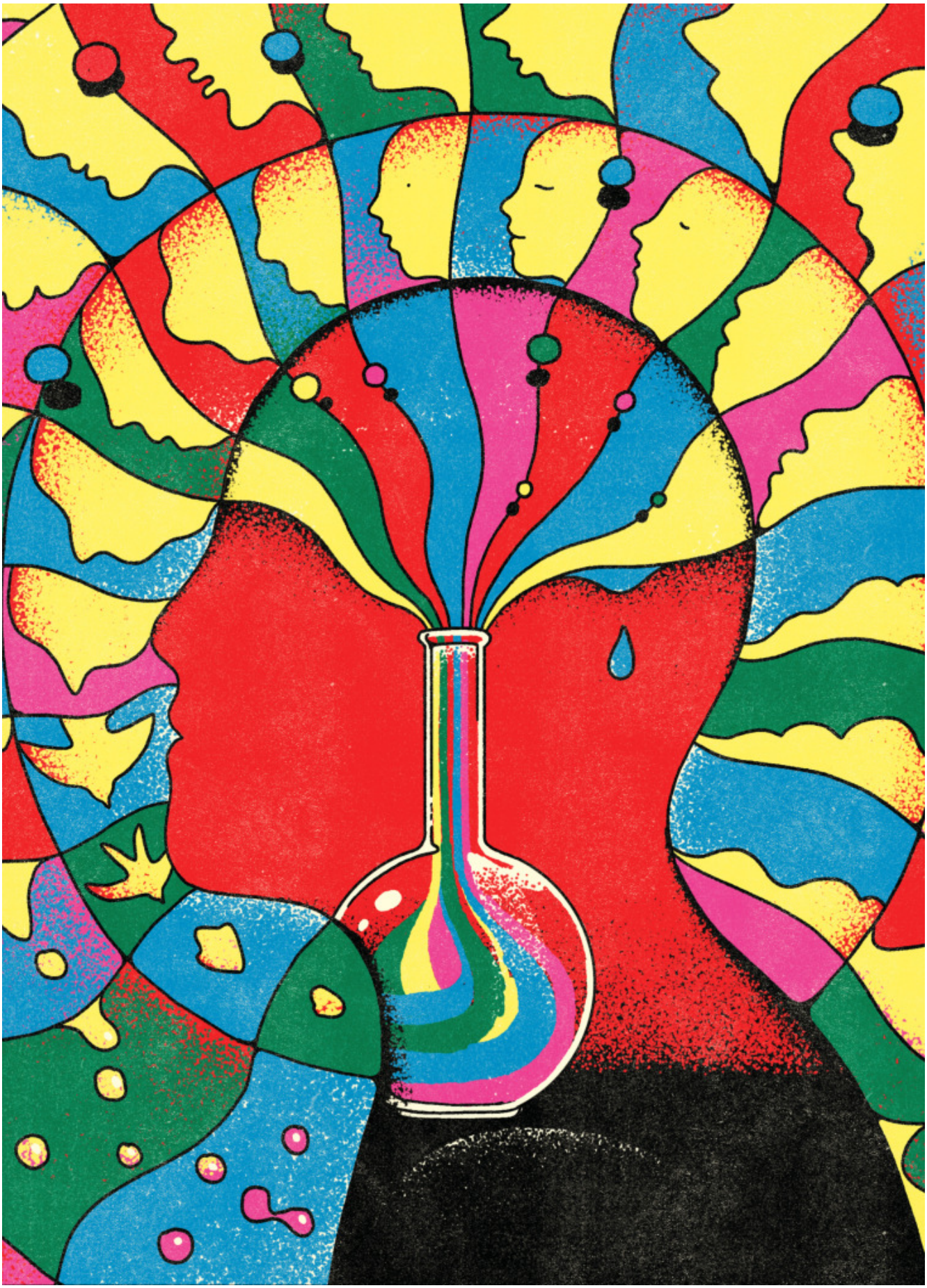
Were some families maybe—oh, I don't know—eating meat loaf on TV trays as they watched this nice lady undergo her mind-bending, molecule-revealing journey through inner space? Did they switch to "Father Knows Best" or "The Perry Como Show" afterward? One of the feats that the historian Benjamin Breen pulls off in his lively and engrossing new book, "Tripping on Utopia: Margaret Mead, the Cold War, and the Troubled Birth of Psychedelic Science" (Grand Central), is to make a cultural moment like the anonymous woman's televised trip seem less incongruous, if no less fascinating.

In Breen's telling, the buttoned-down nineteen-fifties, not the freewheeling nineteen-sixties, brought together the ingredients, some of them toxic, for the first large-scale cultural experiment with consciousness-expanding substances. The psychedelic flowering of the sixties has, it turns out, a prequel—a rich and partly forgotten chapter before the hippie movement, before the shamanistic preening and posturing of Timothy Leary, and before the war on drugs shut all that down. This earlier history encompasses not only the now notorious C.I.A. research into mind-altering drugs but also a lighter, brighter, more public dimension of better living through chemistry, buoyed by postwar scientific optimism and public reverence for expertise. "Timothy Leary and the Baby Boomers did not usher in the first psychedelic era," Breen writes. "They ended it."

So the era we're living in now is not the first in which LSD and other psychedelics were poised to enter the mainstream. In the twenty-twenties, psychedelics sit comfortably within politely au-courant circles of wellness culture, startup capitalism, and clinical research. Some Gen X-ers are as likely to try ayahuasca for a midlife crisis, or sub out their Lexapro for microdoses of LSD, as they might once have been to troop into the woods behind campus the day after finals with a few friends and a freezer bag full of shrivelled mushrooms. A number of recent studies have shown that psychedelics hold promise for treating depression, easing end-of-life anxiety, and helping people cope with grief. The best-selling 2018 book about this new science and its ramifications, "How to Change Your Mind," by Michael Pollan, has been so influential in piquing hopes for hallucinogens that scientific papers have identified what they call the Pollan Effect. (It describes the high expectations that some subjects bring to psychedelic studies, which can potentially influence how they report their experiences.) In 2019, Denver became the first U.S. city to decriminalize the use of psilocybin, the psychoactive compound in hallucinogenic mushrooms, and in 2020 Oregon became the first state to legalize it for use in therapy. Voters in several other localities, from Santa Cruz to Detroit to Washington, D.C., have since approved similar initiatives. This year, the F.D.A. will consider approving MDMA, the drug many of us know in its street form as Ecstasy (and may still associate with raves), for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. Even big pharmaceutical companies are looking to get in on the action.

The contemporary psychedelic movement shimmers, in other words, with next-big-thing energy, much of it centered less on freestyle tripping than on medicalized treatment. But Breen, a professor at U.C. Santa Cruz, whose previous book was on the history of the global drug trade, establishes that the feeling of déjà vu is real. We have been on this trip—or a version of it—before. For anyone who has closely followed the sinuous cultural, legal, and scientific saga of LSD, the outlines of its story will not come as a revelation. The C.I.A.'s MK-ULTRA program—which, headed by the chemist Sidney Gottlieb, conducted covert experiments into mind control via hypnosis and psychoactive drugs—has attracted many chroniclers since it first came to light, in the mid-seventies. (Recent examples include the investigative reporter Stephen Kinzer, in the 2019 book "Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control," and the documentarian Errol Morris, with his eerie six-part Netflix series, "Wormwood," about Frank Olson, a biowarfare scientist and

ABOVE: LALALIMOLA



Long before the hippies, mainstream figures such as Cary Grant and Clare Boothe Luce became one with the universe.

ILLUSTRATION BY M FATCHUROFI

"Should I wear my usual pants, or the same pants but newer?"

• •

C.I.A. employee who plunged to his death from a Manhattan hotel room in 1953, nine days after Gottlieb furtively dosed him with LSD.)

Breen extends this hall of mirrors, though. For one thing, he anoints the anthropologists Margaret Mead and her third husband, Gregory Bateson, as the book's principals, a role he allows they would "likely have been surprised" by. (It's true that they don't turn up much in previous histories of psychedelics.) They belong here as spiritual guides, weaving in and out of a checkered story, Breen explains, owing to "their shared vision of science as a tool for expanding human consciousness." Mead, for one, thought it was crucial that, as she wrote, we "reach an awareness which will give us a new control over our human destiny" and "learn consciously to create civilizations within which an increasing proportion of human beings will realize more of what they have it in them to be."

Her study of trance states, in Bali and elsewhere, was part of a long-standing interest in psychedelics. After conducting field work with the Omaha people in Nebraska in the nineteen-thirties, she wrote respectfully about their ritual use of peyote to promote social cohesion, foster enlightenment, and respond to social stresses. In the mid-fifties, by which time Mead was a well-known public intellectual, she was intrigued enough by LSD to observe its administration to a young volunteer in an MK-ULTRA lab experiment. Drugs such as LSD could be "integrative and insight-giving," she wrote in a letter to a colleague, so long as they were pursued in "a responsible experimental spirit." Mead told other colleagues that she planned to take LSD herself. What ultimately dissuaded her, Breen suspects, was the drug's reputation as a truth serum. In 1955, five years after her marriage to Bateson dissolved, Mead would move in with her romantic partner Rhoda Métraux, an anthropologist. They lived together for the next twenty years. Mead had close relationships with C.I.A. and other government officials; she had a security clearance; she was a prominent and widely admired scientist. She must have worried, Breen argues, that she'd risk it all by letting slip an avowal of her bisexuality.

Bateson was an anthropologist who developed a specialty in systems theory and cybernetics, and he served in the O.S.S., the precursor of the C.I.A., during the Second World War. He mainly worked on propaganda missions in Burma, but his stint in the agency brought him into contact with intelligence figures who were interested in the military applications of mind-altering drugs. He and Mead remained in touch with these shadowy figures and with a broader circle of researchers who met regularly at influential conferences, sponsored by the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, on subjects such as neuroscience, cybernetics, hallucinogens, and the future. In 1959, Bateson set Allen Ginsberg up on the poet's first psychedelic trip, at a lab near Palo Alto. "It was astounding," Ginsberg wrote home to his father, a schoolteacher in Paterson, New Jersey. "I lay back, listening to music, & went into a sort of trance state . . . and in a fantasy much like a Coleridge World of Kubla Khan saw a vision of that part of my consciousness which seemed to be permanent transcendent and identical with the origin of the universe—a sort of identity common to everything—but a clear & coherent sight of it. Rather beautiful visual images also, of Hindu-type gods dancing on themselves." Ginsberg urged his father, who was also a poet, to try it. Less successfully, Bateson worked for a time with the marine researcher (and inventor of the sensory-deprivation tank) John Lilly, who once administered LSD to dolphins. It's a sad story: four of the seven dolphins subsequently died, or, as Lilly put it, delusively, "committed suicide" by "refusing to eat or breathe."

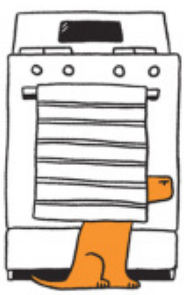
Both Bateson and Mead had entanglements with the dark side of what Breen calls "the psychedelic Cold War." They were personally and professionally close to top MK-ULTRA personnel. Still, they remain the most sympathetic figures in the book, thanks to

their open-minded fascination with cultural differences, their fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality, and their dedication to facts. Timothy Leary would argue, for instance, that homosexuality was a pathology that LSD could "cure"; he claimed—oops—that it had cured Allen Ginsberg. By contrast, Mead, who was a generation older, appeared in 1961 on a nationally syndicated TV broadcast, "The Rejected," where, Breen writes, she surrounded herself with New Guinean artifacts and "challenged the notion that homosexuality and transgender identities were 'unnatural,'" rather than "part of the rich diversity of human potential."

Bateson, for his part, dragged a heavy weight of family expectations around with him most of his life. He was one of three sons born to William Bateson, a prominent English biologist (he was the first to use the term "genetics" to describe the study of heredity), who wanted all three to make great scientific discoveries. But both of Bateson's brothers died young—one in a hopeless infantry charge just a few weeks before the end of the First World War, and one by suicide four years later. As Breen tells it, Bateson's preoccupation with attaining the scientific glory for which he and his brothers were destined led him down some blind alleys, including a misconceived family-dynamics theory of the etiology of schizophrenia and that unfortunate spell with Lilly. But Bateson could also be remarkably prescient. At an ultra-hip 1967 conference in London called "The Dialectics of Liberation"—it was attended by, among others, the Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the anti-psychiatry crusader R. D. Laing, and Ginsberg—Bateson gave a speech about fossil-fuel-caused global warming, in what one historian thinks might have been the "first instance of climate change being discussed before a lay audience." Bateson lamented that people were seeking "short cuts to wisdom" through LSD, but, given the environmental catastrophe we faced, he said, he could understand the impulse.

Breen has an eye for the telling detail, and a gift for introducing even walk-on characters with brio. One is George Hunter White, a former narcotics investigator from Pasadena who ran some of the real-world testing of LSD for the C.I.A., setting up bachelor pads in the West Village and in the Marina neighborhood of San Francisco where unsuspecting individuals could be surreptitiously dosed with the drug (in their drinks, food, or cigarettes) while agents observed and secretly recorded their behavior. Breen offers this quick, memorable sketch: "The 35-year-old White, who has been likened to 'an extremely menacing bowling ball,' had pale blue, Siberian husky eyes set in a gin-blossomed face, a boundless appetite for intoxicants, and a lifelong fascination with Chinese culture."

One impression such portraits leave the reader with is that the nineteen-fifties and the early sixties were much weirder than you might imagine if you were still taking your cues from "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." People who worked with psychedelics seem to have been especially adroit at projecting authoritative normality while conducting some very screwy and sometimes quite sinister business behind the scenes. Harold Abramson, a low-profile physician at Mt. Sinai Hospital, in New York, whose expertise was in allergies, led a life that was "outwardly conventional, a model of midcentury domesticity." He and his wife, who had four children, "collected Japanese netsuke carvings, carefully cultivated the lawn of their palatial home in suburban Long Island, and he played bridge with their neighbors once a week." But Abramson was also a chemical-weapons expert who fed LSD to the Siamese fighting fish he kept at his lab (as well as to willing guests at his dinner parties), and played a key role in the MK-ULTRA program. Breen thinks he may have been the most influential researcher into psychedelics of the twentieth century.



And yet the late fifties and early sixties were also a kind of golden age for earnest, out-in-the-open exploration of psychedelics. Chemists at Sandoz Laboratories, in Basel, Switzerland, first synthesized an experimental compound known as lysergic acid diethylamide in 1938. By 1949, little bottles of the stuff were rolling off a Swiss assembly line, bound for labs and doctors' offices around the world. (Officially, only licensed physicians who were engaged in research could get hold of it, but it didn't take long for it to filter into other networks.) In a period before the development of modern antidepressants or, indeed, of many psychoactive drugs at all—boom times were on the way, starting with the first tranquillizers to come on the market, in the early sixties, but they hadn't quite arrived yet—LSD seemed like a wonder drug, radiant with scientific promise. Aldous Huxley, in his 1954 memoir, "The Doors of Perception," could compare psychedelics favorably to alcohol and barbiturates. "To most people," Huxley wrote, mescaline "is almost completely innocuous."

Psychedelics, for many who tried them, held not only the promise of fixing a clinical problem but of opening those doors of perception to some noumenal realm otherwise hidden to us. After taking a tiny amount of LSD, Huxley recalled that "what came through the closed door was the realization—not the knowledge, for this wasn't verbal or abstract—but the direct, total awareness from the inside, so to say, of Love as the primary and fundamental cosmic fact."

It was true that people sometimes freaked out, on trips that seemed to mire them in apocalyptic hellscapes. The dissolution of ego commonly experienced on acid—a sensation that the C.I.A. wanted to put to use for interrogation purposes—could be frightening. But people who experimented willingly with LSD often reported feelings of warm, oceanic well-being or images of incomparable, redemptive beauty. In 1959, Cary Grant gave a series of interviews to a newspaper columnist in which he revealed that he had been transported by LSD. "All the sadness and vanities were torn away," he said. "I was pleased by the hard core of strength I found inside me." On his seventy-second trip, Grant, speaking into a dictaphone in the office of his Beverly Hills doctor, riffed on space flight and Hegelian

dialectics: "Everything creates its opposite," he said, "and therefore cyclicly itself." (I like thinking of Grant, wearing an ascot, perhaps, intoning these dreamy revelations in clipped, patrician tones.)

Clare Boothe Luce, the former Republican congresswoman and ambassador, and the wife of the publishing tycoon Henry Luce, became an LSD booster, turning to it many times for relief from depression and grief over her daughter's death in a car accident. And she was quite the establishment figure: while tripping on acid for the first time, she had to refuse a phone call from Vice-President Richard Nixon, who was seeking her political advice.

By the mid-sixties, though, LSD was taking on a new aura, gaining a groovy reputation as a pathway to utopia. The Pied Piper of that movement was Leary, who co-founded the Harvard Psilocybin Project in 1960. In a 1967 debate with the neuroscientist Jerome Lettvin, Leary declared that "the real goal of the scientist is to flip out." LSD, cut loose from its medical moorings and ties to power, acquired a lasting association with hippie youth, which, in turn, made it more vulnerable to moral panics and political crackdowns. By the end of 1967, several states had banned psychedelics, and in 1970 Congress classified them as Schedule I drugs, connoting "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse." In 1971, President Nixon declared a war on drugs—including heroin and marijuana, but also LSD, the substance that his old friend Clare Boothe Luce had taken and touted, and that medical authorities had once embraced as a psychiatric drug of great promise.

Does it matter for our present moment that psychedelics had a respectable, scientifically sanctioned past? Today, there is much enthusiastic media coverage about so-called classical psychedelics, such as LSD and psilocybin, and newer ones, such as MDMA, focussing on their specific mental-health applications—studies showing that they help some people with treatment-resistant depression and so on. Since they pose little risk of addiction, since depression and anxiety are on the rise, and since the pharmaceuticals we have at our disposal don't work for everybody or sometimes cause unwelcome side effects, this focus makes sense. (More broadly, for many people now, psychedelics might evoke an association with wellness—the kind of purposeful, holistic hygiene a person might also pursue through silent retreats, mindful eating, or yoga.)

It's worth remembering that LSD was never fully medicalized, not even in the late nineteen-fifties, the first heyday of legal and scientific psychedelics research. One important contributor to the field, the psychologist Betty Eisner, helped develop the idea that "set and setting" shaped the quality of psychedelic therapy. The emphasis she placed on soft lighting, comfortable furnishings, and the right music, customized for the individual, helped determine the protocols used today. (According to Ido Hartogsohn's book, "American Trip," from 2020, Eisner found that Beethoven concertos were preferable to Gregorian chants, which often "evoked strong feelings of guilt.") But Eisner's own approach to psychedelic experiences became increasingly mystical. In 1964, she wrote to a colleague that she had become interested in "material" revealed on trips that seemed to "come from past lives and certain aspects of the patient which appear to come from outer space."

In short, psychedelics have never been and will never be like other pharmaceuticals. "Although efforts to bring psychedelics to the market as FDA-approved psychiatric treatments are well underway, it is doubtful whether the category of 'prescription drug' will ever be able to contain them, because of their varied uses," Breen observed in an essay for the Washington *Post* last year. Neither, though, are they likely to reëmerge as modern-day accessories to spiritual trance states, the sort of shamanistic practices in which, as Mead had written, "people take a great many precautions in selecting and ritually training those who will engage regularly in trance and in controlling where and under what circumstances trance may be induced." Inasmuch as psychedelics generate both medical interventions and spiritual quests, and maybe other experiences as well, then, as Breen says, we may need new categories to accommodate them.

One of the striking motifs in Breen's book is the optimism with which many of the scientists he writes about, including Mead, saw the future. Psychedelics were among the forces that they believed could heal cultural rifts and advance the evolution of civilizations. It's hard to imagine replicating that kind of optimism today. We know far too much to trust in the purity of science, the transparency of govern-

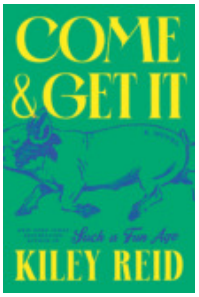
"The sugary cereal goes in the cart or this goes in the memoir."

ment, the good will of pharmaceutical companies, or the power of individual enlightenment to melt cultural barriers and repair the world. But perhaps there's hope in the kind of skepticism that can make us approach matters in smarter ways this time around.

Reading about the recent studies of LSD's positive effects, for example, we know to be at least a little circumspect. Many of the studies involve a small number of subjects, who've been very tightly screened. It's hard to keep such research double-blind, since people in the placebo arm of a hallucinogenic trial can often guess that they didn't get the stuff that would have made them trip. A recent academic article by two psychologists at Leiden University, Michiel van Elk and Eiko L. Fried, identified no fewer than ten "pressing challenges" to the validity of current psychedelic studies—including conflicts of interest (especially since pharmaceutical companies have joined academic groups in conducting them), inadequate reporting of adverse events, small sample sizes, lack of long-term follow-up, and the difficulty of creating persuasive placebos. But van Elk and Fried are not raising these problems to try to shut down psychedelic research; they aim to improve its "rigor and credibility" with specific recommendations: "Our hope is that new studies may find credible evidence that psychedelic therapy can be a useful tool for specific groups of patients."

In 1966, Sidney Cohen, Eisner's colleague and the psychiatrist who had provided Luce with her LSD, expressed his worry that psychedelic research had gone astray: "We are seeing accidents happen. We are frightening the public. We are getting laws passed [banning the drug]. We are not using the anthropological approach of insinuating a valuable drug of this sort into our culture . . . gradually demonstrating the goodness of the thing." Maybe we know enough now to proceed not with messianic hype but with testable hope, the kind that won't risk a war-on-drugs backlash, or promise utopia, or put powerful hallucinogens into the hands of clandestine medical-ethics-flouting researchers, but that could still end up demonstrating the goodness of the thing. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



Come and Get It, *by Kiley Reid (Putnam)*. Agatha Paul, the narrator of this fizzy campus novel, is the acclaimed author of a book on "physical mourning." During a visiting professorship at the University of Arkansas, she intends to conduct research on weddings. Yet the subject prickles—she is still reeling from a painful separation—and she soon pivots to a new topic: "How students navigate money." Paul herself quickly becomes an object of fascination for many of the students, and the stakes are raised when one of them offers Paul the use of her room to eavesdrop on conversations between the undergraduates. Almost on a whim, Paul accepts, and small transgressions soon give way to larger ones.

Disillusioned, *by Benjamin Herold (Penguin)*. This intrepid inquiry into the unfulfilled promise of America's suburbs posits that a "deep-seated history of white control, racial exclusion, and systematic forgetting" has poisoned the great postwar residential experiment. It anatomizes a geographically scattered handful of failing public schools, incorporating the author's conversations with five affected families. Herold, a white journalist raised in Penn Hills, a Pittsburgh suburb, peels back layers of structural racism, granting that "the abundant opportunities my family extracted from Penn Hills a generation earlier were linked to the cratering fortunes of the families who lived there now."

Poor Deer, *by Claire Oshetsky (Ecco)*. This novel follows a sixteen-year-old-girl named Margaret and her attempts to reckon with the death of her best friend in childhood, for which she was partly responsible. In time, Margaret's role in the tragedy was relegated to rumor; when she confessed, her mother told her, "Never repeat that awful lie again." Now, in adolescence, Margaret attempts to document the incident honestly, accompanied by Poor Deer, the physical embodiment of her guilt, who intervenes whenever Margaret begins to gloss over the truth. The author renders the four-year-old Margaret's inner life with sensitive complexity, depicting an alert child logic that defies adults' view of her as slow and unfeeling. In the present day, the novel considers whether its narrator's tendency to reimagine the past might be repurposed to envision her future.

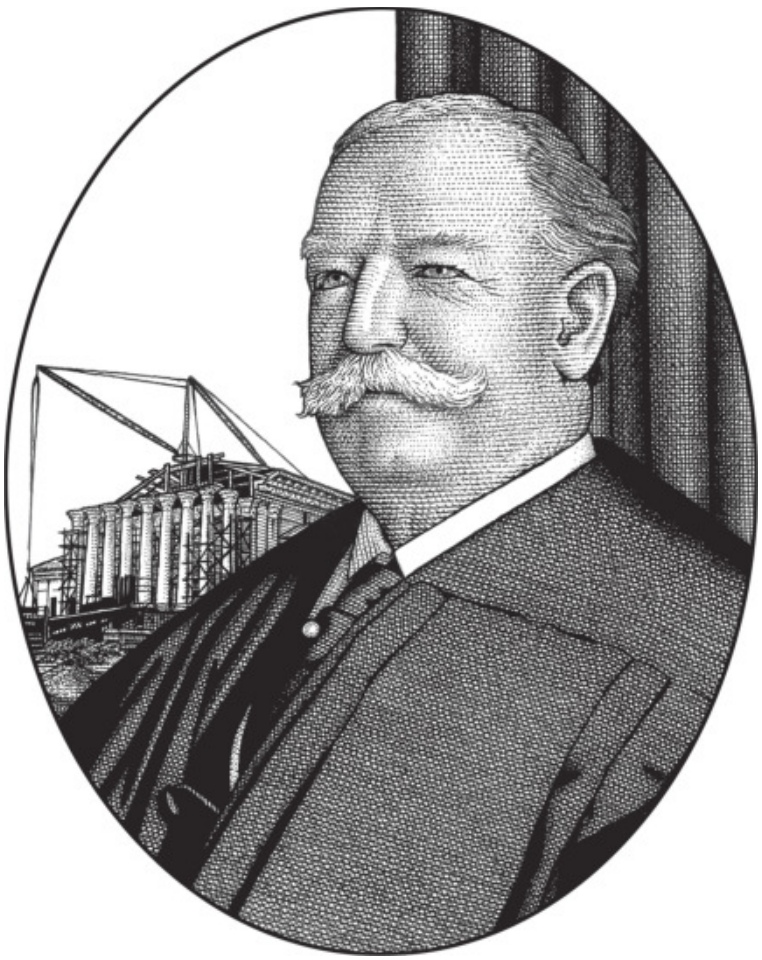
Nonfiction, *by Julie Myerson (Tin House)*. The narrator of this raw-nerved and plangent novel, a fiction writer who goes unnamed, addresses much of the book to her drug-addicted and intermittently violent adolescent daughter. Woven throughout her ruminations on her daughter's struggles are the writer's cascading reminiscences of her own fragmented childhood and the romance she rekindled with a married ex-lover when her daughter was young. Set in and around a muted London, the novel is a sustained meditation on the trials of family, marriage, and creativity. Writing is an act "of insane self-belief," the narrator says. "The moment you listen to the opinions of others . . . you risk breaking the spell and, if you're not careful, sanity creeps in."

BOOKS

THE CHIEF

How William Howard Taft remade the Supreme Court.

BY JILL LEPORE



His tenure set the tone for the institution, even into the twenty-first century.

"Mrs. Justice Holmes died on Tuesday night," the Supreme Court's Chief Justice, William Howard Taft, reported on May 5, 1929. Mr. Justice Holmes—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.—had relied on his wife, Fanny Bowditch, for nearly everything. They'd been married for fifty-seven years. Her death "seems like the beginning of my own," Holmes wrote. And yet, on the very day of her death, Holmes, eighty-eight, drafted an opinion for the Court and sent it to the Chief. "I suppose there are a good many who are counting on his retirement," Taft mused. "If so, they miss their guess." In the end, it was Taft who went first, dying less than a year later, at the age of seventy-two.

William Howard Taft is the only Chief Justice of the United States to have served as its President. If he cannot be said to have had the keenest legal mind, he had the strong and steady arm of an experienced executive. He ran the Court for only nine years, but during that time he ushered in sweeping reforms, changing not only how many cases the Court hears but also where it operates, elevating its power, its prestige, and, not least, its mystique. Originally, the Supreme Court heard essentially every case that reached its chambers; it had little choice. "Questions may occur which we would gladly avoid; but we cannot avoid them," John Marshall, the longest-serving Chief Justice, wrote in 1821. A century later, in a country whose population had grown tenfold, the Court, still obliged to hear most cases brought before it, was overwhelmed by its backlog. Taft convened a committee that he charged with drafting legislation that would rationalize the Court's docket. In what became known as the Judges' Bill, the Justices proposed the certiorari system, by which they would, in most areas of law, be able to exercise their discretion to choose which cases they deemed worthy of their attention. Taft went before the House Judiciary Committee to explain the importance of "letting the Supreme Court decide what was important and what was unimportant." Congress passed the bill in 1925. "Easily one-half of certiorari applications now presented have no justification at all," Taft reported in the *Yale Law Journal* nine months later.

The executive branch had the White House and the legislature the Capitol, but the Court had no home of its own and had long met in a cramped room, the old Senate chamber. Taft persuaded Congress to authorize funds for the construction of a building for the Court alone, befitting the status of the judiciary. Taft himself chose the seven-acre site. The new building was touted as having more marble than any structure in the world, an austere and imposing monument to the rule of law. It looks like a Grecian temple, restored.

Taft, in short, got things done. In May, 1929, when Holmes's wife died, Taft wrote to his son, "I have had really to take charge of the funeral arrangements, because Holmes can not attend to anything of that sort with any comfort." But Taft also had the good sense to know that Holmes, however distraught, wasn't helpless, and that what he needed most was something to do. He'd already assigned Holmes at least one opinion that term, but Taft told his son, "I don't know but I shall give him another one before the month ends."

In an age of efficiency, Taft made

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ILLUSTRATION BY NINA BUNJEVAC

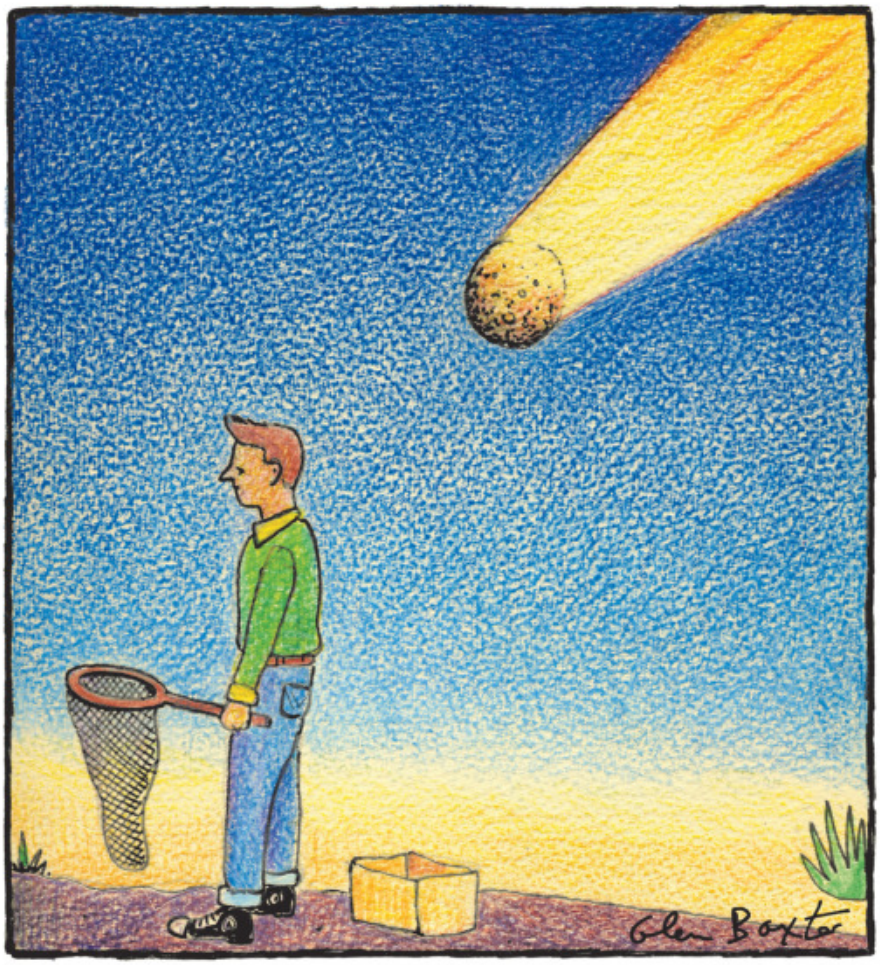
the Supreme Court more efficient, and mightier, but it remains the most secretive branch of the federal government. When it grants or denies cert, it offers no explanation; it simply follows a "rule of four"—if at least four Justices want to hear the case, the Court takes it. This past December, the special counsel Jack Smith asked the Court to grant cert in a case concerning the question of whether Donald Trump, as a former President, is immune from prosecution for actions undertaken during his Presidency. In January, Trump asked the Court to grant cert to hear an appeal of a decision by the Colorado Supreme Court which banned him from the Republican primary ballot. The Court said no to the first, for now, and yes to the second. No word or hint as to its motivations is ever offered. Supreme Court deliberations are held behind closed doors. Its sessions are not broadcast. The Justices are expected to avoid the glare of public attention. They don't campaign, or at least they're not supposed to. They don't write tell-alls. No law requires them to preserve their papers or, if they do preserve them, to make them available to the public. So tight-lipped is the Court that, in 2022, when someone leaked a draft of the Court's decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, an internal investigation was unable to identify the leaker. The Supreme Court is at once the most closely scrutinized branch of the federal government and the least. It makes its own rules, like the Code of Conduct it released last fall, and, in a sense, it also writes its own history: the accumulation of its opinions. Most other accounts of the Court's history are written by lawyers, a litany of cases with the occasional vivid portrait of a Justice or, less often, a litigant. Much that lies within the Court's history remains unknown, partly because it's never been known outside the Justices' chambers, and partly because even what's known is quite often entirely forgotten. The law writes over itself, like an old floppy disk.

"Taft's presidential perspective forever changed both the role of the chief justice and the institution of the Court," Robert C. Post argues in his landmark two-volume study, "The Taft Court: Making Law for a Divided Nation, 1921-1930" (Cambridge). The book is an attempt to rescue the Taft years from oblivion, since, as Post points out, most of its jurisprudence had been "utterly effaced" within a decade of Taft's death, and was soon engulfed by "an obscurity so deep that most law students cannot now name more than ten Taft Court decisions." But, if Marshall's Chief Justiceship established what the Court would be in the nineteenth century, Taft's established what it would be in the twentieth, and even the twenty-first.

William Howard Taft was a lawyer and a judge before he became President, and he was a lawyer and a judge after he was President. He was born in Ohio in 1857, the year the Supreme Court decided Dred Scott, and went to Yale before studying at the Cincinnati Law School. He'd served three years on Ohio's superior court when, in 1890, he became the youngest ever U.S. Solicitor General. He argued eighteen cases before the Supreme Court, and won fifteen. In 1892, he was appointed as a federal judge for the Sixth Circuit. While serving as governor of the Philippines, he was twice offered a position on the Supreme Court; he declined both times. Elected President in 1908, he failed to win reëlection in 1912, after which he joined the faculty of Yale Law School. His best-known academic work is a series of lectures published, in 1916, as "Our Chief Magistrate and His Powers," a critique of the Presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson masquerading as what Taft described as a "careful study from an unbiased standpoint of the historian and the jurist."

Taft had long wanted to restructure the federal judiciary, and he was also keen to defend the Constitution from what he considered to be the excesses of Progressivism. In 1913, when Charles Beard published "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States," arguing that the Framers had, in 1787, crafted a system of government designed to protect their own property interests, Taft denounced this interpretation as both preposterous and dangerous. And when Wilson nominated the nation's leading Progressive lawyer, Louis Brandeis, to the Court, in 1916, Taft vigorously opposed the nomination. "It is one of the deepest wounds that I have had as an American and a lover of the Constitution and a believer in progressive conservatism, that such a man as Brandeis could be put on the Court," Taft wrote, calling Brandeis a muckraker, a hypocrite, and a socialist. He solicited the signatures of six other former presidents of the American Bar Association for a letter that he wrote opposing Brandeis's nomination. (Much of the objection to Brandeis was antisemitic; much was political.) "I think as ill of WHT's morals now as of his intellect," Brandeis wrote to his wife in 1910. Privately, Brandeis referred to the walrus-mustached Taft, who tipped the scales at about three hundred pounds, as "the fat man."

In 1921, Taft delightedly accepted an invitation from Warren G. Harding to serve as Chief Justice. He joined a Court that, beginning with its decision in Lochner v. New York, in 1905, had struck down as unconstitutional state and federal laws regulating labor. Most notoriously, from the vantage of Progressives, the Court had, in 1918, declared an act of Congress that regulated child labor unconstitutional. Taft, seated in 1921, navigated by these same stars. On May 15, 1922, in Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Co., the Court issued Taft's majority opinion, striking down a federal law that had attempted to restrict child labor through a punitive tax. Weeks later, in a speech before the American Federation of Labor, the Wisconsin senator Robert La Follette, decrying what he called "judicial oligarchy," proposed a constitutional amendment that would grant Congress the right to nullify Supreme Court opinions. La Follette had campaigned against Taft's bid for reëlection in 1912, and had voted against his confirmation to the Court. He was also a close friend of Louis Brandeis's. The Court had repeatedly defied the will of the people, expressed through state legislatures and through congressional action, La Follette said. "We should not have to amend the



STARTING A METEORITE COLLECTION WAS GOING TO BE SO MUCH EASIER THAN CHRIS COULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED

• •

Constitution every time we want to pass progressive laws," he argued.

Progressives called for all manner of remedies, including a child-labor amendment and an amendment that would require Justices to be elected and to hold office for ten-year terms. The Idaho senator William Borah, pointing out that roughly forty "exceedingly important" cases had been decided by a 5–4 majority in the last thirty years, proposed that any decisions that would overturn an act of Congress ought to require a seven-Justice majority. Taft was distressed, but confident. "Meantime," he wrote to a fellow-Justice, "there is nothing for the Court to do but to go on about its business, exercise the jurisdiction it has, and not be frightened because of threats against its existence."

The historian Charles Warren came to the Court's defense. "There is no novelty in these attacks," Warren declared of the criticisms advanced by men like La Follette and Borah, insisting that "no functioning body under our Government has been more subjected to continuous assault than the Supreme Court." Warren, a former Assistant U.S. Attorney General who had co-founded the Immigration Restriction League—and a Boston Brahmin who was so dedicated to Harvard that he was rarely seen without a crimson bow tie—agreed with Taft's denunciation of Charles Beard's interpretation of the Framers. "Young men must be taught that America is much more than the result of class interests and sectional influences," Warren maintained. "They must learn that the men who made America had aspirations and beliefs apart from their personal fortunes." In 1922, he published a three-volume book called "The Supreme Court in United States History." "No one can read the history of the Court's career without marveling at its potent effect upon the political development of the Nation, and without concluding that the Nation owes most of its strength to the determination of the Judges to maintain the National supremacy," he argued. In 1923, the book won the Pulitzer Prize.

Every history of the Supreme Court takes a position on the nature of its authority. Warren's work not only placed the Court at the center of American history but also defended it against Progressive critics. "The Taft Court" is a search for the origins of the Court's current divisions. Post, a professor of constitutional law who has a Ph.D. in American Civilization and is a former dean of Yale Law School, argues that the Taft Court wrestled with four different ways of interpreting the Constitution and exercising judicial review. The most conservative theory granted the Court authority to overrule legislation in order to make sure the law accorded with custom and tradition. Holmes's intellectual commitments limited judicial review to cases where it was required by "the literal meaning and plain intent of a constitutional text": "The justification of a law for us cannot be found in the fact that our fathers have always followed it," he wrote. "It must be found in some help which the law brings toward reaching a social end which the governing power of the community has made up its mind that it wants." Taft's rule for whether a law could be declared unconstitutional had to do with his equation of progress with the accumulation of wealth—property and contracts had to be protected at all costs. The fourth theory was the most progressive and, in the nineteen-twenties, advanced only by Brandeis, who, as Post puts it, "held that the purpose of the American Constitution is to

create a successful democracy." This appears to be Post's position, too.

Rich with close readings of cases that rely on sources scarcely ever used before—including docket books only recently discovered in a locked trunk—and benefitting from deep and fruitful quantitative analysis absent in most studies of the Court, "The Taft Court" restores the nineteen-twenties as a turning point in the Court's history, the hinge between laissez-faire conservatism and the duel between the Court and the New Deal in the nineteen-thirties. The luminaries on Taft's court were Holmes and Brandeis. Holmes described Taft's opinions—between 1921 and 1928, there were two hundred and forty-nine of them, compared with two hundred and five by Holmes and a hundred and ninety-three by Brandeis—as "rather spongy." Brandeis, with a nod to the abolitionist Wendell Phillips's description of Abraham Lincoln (a "first-rate second-rate man"), said that Taft had "a first-rate second-rate mind." But Taft's opinions were the Court's opinions. Post reports that Taft "authored or joined the opinion for the Court in 98.7 percent of its decisions."

Taft ran an amiable bench. Once he'd joined the Court, he took the initiative of forging a peace, and even a friendship, with Brandeis. "I've come to like Brandeis very much indeed," he wrote to his daughter, and Brandeis, for his part, was charmed. That didn't mean they agreed. Post's data reveals that, with one exception, Brandeis was the least likely member of the Court to agree with the majority, his dissents nearly always informed by his commitment to democracy over prosperity.

Taft spoke for the majority, Holmes and Brandeis for the minority. "If Holmes' dissents in constitutional cases had been followed," Taft wrote to his brother, "we should have no Constitution." Holmes was a better writer than Taft; one measure of this is that he was briefer. Taft's opinions averaged nearly nine pages, Holmes's just over three. ("Strike the jugular and let the rest go," Holmes said.) In May of 1929, right after his wife died, Holmes wrote one of his most blistering dissents. The majority had ruled in favor of denying citizenship to a Hungarian-born pacifist and feminist named Rosika Schwimmer, deeming her insufficiently "attached to the principles of the Constitution" to be naturalized. Holmes wrote, "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate." Amen.

Post's analysis—along with his amazing data—reveals the depth of Taft's disagreements with Holmes. It also captures the distance between Holmes and Brandeis. Holmes "approved progressive legislation only because he believed that a judge should defer to legislative judgments," Post writes, but Brandeis advocated for economic reform in the interest of social justice. "He bullies me a little on that from time to time," Holmes once said. Post is subtle on this distinction. "Holmes never developed any comparable concept of the public good," he writes, contrasting him with Brandeis. "Holmes sought only to *channel* social contestation by subjecting it to orderly processes of law."

Taft tried to rein Brandeis in. "Our Constitution is not a strait-jacket," Brandeis wrote in the draft of a dissent in United States v. Moreland, in which he was joined by Holmes. "It is a living organism. As such it is capable of growth—of expansion and of adaption to new conditions. Growth implies changes political, economic and social. Growth which is significant manifests itself rather in intellectual and moral conceptions than in material things. Because our Constitution possesses this quality of adaption, it has endured as the fundamental law of an ever developing people." Taft asked him to take these sentences out because "they are certain to be used to support views that I could not subscribe to." To secure the Chief Justice's concurrence in his opinion, Brandeis omitted them, with regret.

This was exceptional; Taft hated dissents and, Post reports, "himself dissented less than any chief justice except John Marshall." In 1924, when La Follette ran for President on a Progressive ticket whose platform included Supreme Court nullification,

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the Chief Justice wrote wryly to a friend that the Wisconsin senator "could find a good deal of material in Brandeis's dissenting opinions." And, as Post suggests, the attacks on the Taft Court likely contributed to a diminishing number of dissents in the first half of the decade.

Taft led the Court to the right, especially after La Follette lost his bid for the Presidency. "Taft allowed conservatives on the Court to overplay their hand," Post concludes. "The result was an ever-growing if unexpressed anger at the Court's increasingly aggressive conservative agenda. There would eventually be the devil to pay for such overreaching decisions." But that devil would come dunning in the nineteen-thirties, during the battles between New Dealers and the Court led by Charles Evans Hughes. On May 27, 1935, in one of its last sessions in the old Senate chamber, the Hughes Court struck down the most important elements of the New Deal in three unanimous decisions that F.D.R. described as the most fateful decisions the Court had made since Dred Scott. When the Court moved into its new building—a building so ostentatiously self-important, down to the last trimmings, that reporters likened it to an icebox decorated by a mad upholsterer—the Justices struck down more than a dozen laws in eighteen months. F.D.R., pledging "to save the Constitution from the Court, and the Court from itself," proposed enlarging the Court by naming one new Justice for every sitting Justice older than seventy, which described six of them, including the Chief.

It's hard to say quite how much responsibility Taft bears for the Court crisis of the thirties. The Hughes Court was in crucial ways a product of the Taft Court, and especially of Taft himself: Taft, as President, had appointed Hughes to the Court, in 1910; Hughes had resigned in 1916, to run for President, but Taft urged Herbert Hoover to name Hughes as the new Chief Justice. If Taft hadn't seized so much power for the Court in the twenties, it would have had less to exert in the thirties. And the Taft years also focussed public attention on the age and diminishing capacity of the Justices. Taft, never in good health, had a heart attack in 1924 and another one in 1926. In 1927, the year he turned seventy, he confided to his daughter, "My mental faculties are dulling a bit." Less able to think independently, he deferred to the more conservative Justices on the Court, Willis Van Devanter and Pierce Butler. Very precipitously, Taft slipped into dementia. "The truth is that Taft for some time had really lost his grip," Brandeis wrote to a friend and colleague. "The fear was entertained that unless he resigned at once he might lapse into a mental condition which would make it impossible for him to resign and in which he might continue for an indefinite period," Hughes wrote; he was nominated for Chief Justice on the very day that Taft resigned. The former Chief died only weeks later, on March 8, 1930, on Holmes's eighty-ninth birthday. Weirdly, another Justice on the Taft Court, Edward Sanford, only sixty-four, collapsed and died that same day. "Such events," Holmes said, "must be accepted in silent awe."

"The Taft Court" exists because of a decision that Holmes made near the end of his life. On March 8, 1931, on his ninetieth birthday, he spoke on the radio for the first and only time. Talking into a microphone on the desk in the study of his red brick house in Washington, D.C., he coughed and then proceeded slowly and precisely. "To express one's feelings, as the end draws near, is too intimate a task," he began, sounding something like John Barrymore if Barrymore were playing King Lear. Rosika Schwimmer sent him a telegram wishing him a happy birthday. (After the Court's decision in U.S. v. Schwimmer, she'd written to thank him for restoring her faith in "the inherent idealism" of the nation to which she'd hoped to belong, and they'd struck up a friendship.) Not long after that birthday, Holmes retired. He remains the oldest person ever to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Schwimmer visited him and sent him a copy of Erich Kästner's best-selling mystery "Emil and the Detectives." Holmes loved mystery novels. "This fellow is the best of them all," he wrote on his copy of a Nero Wolfe mystery, by Rex Stout. Asked whether he'd read any Supreme Court decisions lately, he said, "Not a damn one."

Meanwhile, Holmes wrote a new will. He had no heirs, and, although he bequeathed small gifts here and there, he left about half of his considerable estate—some two hundred and sixty thousand dollars, or nearly six million dollars today—to a single beneficiary, the United States, in what was the largest unrestricted gift ever made to the federal government. Holmes died of pneumonia in 1935, two days before his ninety-fourth birthday. F.D.R. called on Congress to assign the bequest to "some purpose worthy of the great man who gave it." It took twenty years, but eventually a congressionally appointed Oliver Wendell Holmes Devise committee determined that the money should be used to prepare a definitive history of the Supreme Court. Robert Post's book on the Taft Court is the last of the originally planned volumes to be published. Writing the Holmes Devise History of the Supreme Court of the United States has taken nearly a century.

"History sets us free," Holmes once wrote. One day, if the Holmes Devise committee assigns scholars to write volumes on the Rehnquist and Roberts Courts, they'll have to examine those Courts' inventions of some brand-new theories about the relationship between history and the law, a text-history-and-tradition test that is far more reactionary than any custom-and-tradition notion used by the conservatives on the Taft Court. "It is revolting to have no better reason for a rule of law than that so it was laid down in the time of Henry IV," Holmes wrote. "It is still more revolting if the grounds upon which it was laid down have vanished long since and the rule simply persists through blind imitation of the past." History in the guise of originalism is a tyrant.

In February of 1930, during Taft's last illness, the Justices sent him a letter of thanks, composed by Holmes. "We call you Chief still," Holmes wrote, expressing affection for the man by way of his title. "We can not let you leave us without trying to tell you how dear you have made it." Taft almost certainly never read it. He was already gone. ♦

DOUBLE VISION

The mystique of twins.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

Sisters attending the Twins Days Festival, in Twinsburg, Ohio, in 1998.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY ELLEN MARK

Half a century later, they still return our gaze, staring back at us in their dark dresses and white stockings, their white headbands pinned in place. The seven-year-old identical twins Cathleen and Colleen Wade stand side by side, pressed together as if to create the illusion that they are conjoined. One twin smiles; the other appraises the photographer. There are remnants of chocolate cake in the creases of their mouths.

Diane Arbus took this portrait, "Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1966," at a Christmas party for families of multiples held at a Knights of Columbus hall. She'd been lurking at such events, prospecting for twins and triplets. Through her viewfinder, the sisters appear less like two separate children than like split aspects of the same soul, simultaneously innocent and foreboding. "I mean, it resembles them," their father told a reporter at a 2005 retrospective of Arbus's work. "But we've always been baffled that she made them look ghostly. None of the other pictures we have of them looks anything like this." The photograph reportedly inspired Stanley Kubrick's depiction of the eerie sisters in "The Shining."

In "How to Be Multiple: The Philosophy of Twins" (Bloomsbury), Helena de Bres aims to rescue twins from the gothic, from horror movies, and from singleton scrutiny, the better to return our gaze and testify to the experience of twindom from the inside out. De Bres invokes twins from life and legend—the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker; Tweedledum and Tweedledee; her own identical twin and herself—to examine how multiples complicate our notions of personhood, attachment, and agency. Twins have been critical to our understanding of ourselves, she argues; they are present in the founding myths of great cities. Romulus and Remus gave us Rome. The twins of the Hindu epic the Ramayana, Lava and Kusha, established Lahore and Kasur. Twins have been worshipped, killed at birth, paraded as curiosities, pricked and probed and experimented on. They have been treated as subhuman and superhuman, and seen to personify every possible duality: collaboration and bitter competition, the purest as well as the most morbidly enmeshed forms of love. And they continue to unsettle our notions about where bodies end and begin, about whether personalities, even fates, are forged or found.

The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart, launched in 1979, famously found striking similarities in the lives of its subjects. The study began in response to the case of a set of identical twins who were separated at birth and reunited at thirty-nine—"the Jim twins." It emerged that both were given the same name and that each had first married a woman named Linda and then a Betty. Each named his dog Toy and his son James Alan (or James Allan). They drove the same kind of car, enjoyed the same hobbies, worked in the same field, and even vacationed at the same beach in Florida. The twin study provided a data-driven heritability index for such features as job satisfaction, schizophrenia, propensity to divorce, and alcoholism. And there were other perplexing parallels: pairs of reunited twins discovered sharing such rituals as flushing the toilet before using it and insisting on walking into the ocean backward.

"How to Be Multiple" has a twin of its own: "Twinkind: The Singular Significance of Twins" (Princeton), by William Viney, a handsomely produced anthology of twin representations—vaudeville performers, subjects of torture, and, yes, the blue dresses with the puffed sleeves worn by the "Shining" twins. Viney also

collaborates with his identical twin, who contributes a foreword. The two books share many sources, and the same data crop up, the same stories and studies. You'll find the same gentle injunction to contemplate, and to learn from, the fractal nature of twin identity.

When twins aren't being regarded as carbon copies, they are slotted (or slot themselves) into opposing roles, which de Bres uses as an entry point for a chapter on the psychology, the temptations, and the costs of binary thinking. In her own family, de Bres became the writer and the introvert, while her twin, Julia, was the artist and the adventurer. Evidently, this is a standard division of roles—one twin becomes Minister for the Exterior, in the psychologist René Zazzo's view, and the other is Minister for the Interior. For the de Bres sisters, this cleft formed early: "In 'The Wind in the Willows,' I was Mole to Julia's Ratty; in 'The House at Pooh Corner,' Piglet to Julia's Pooh. Julia got Mickey Mouse, I got Donald Duck; I got Bert, she got Ernie." De Bres explains, "I went for the cautious, anxious, or melancholy types, the ones who trotted after the sunny or manic hero, providing assistance and advice and raising useful objections."

The book itself began life as a way for the sisters to work together during the pandemic. Julia is a linguistics lecturer in New Zealand and contributed illustrations; de Bres, who teaches philosophy at Wellesley, lives in Massachusetts. As a philosopher, she is drawn to a metaphysics of twinhood: Can personhood be spread across two bodies? Do we ever freely choose, when so much about us exists outside our control? She illuminates her discussions with stories from a close, and cloudless, sibling bond. "She makes me feel my membership status in the universe is active, as if I've already passed some crucial cosmic test and every later qualification is optional," de Bres writes of her sister. "Just thinking of her calms me down, the way I imagine the thought of God, Gaia, or eternal flux does for believers, mystics, and Buddhists."

Such equanimity is merely one of the apparent benefits conferred by twindom. On average, adult twins seem to be healthier and more content than singletons. They have higher life expectancies and a lower incidence of suicide. The benefits are particularly notable in the case of male twins, one theory being that they take fewer physical risks, out of concern for their twin's feelings. ("For the love of Zeus!" de Bres imagines a modern-day Pollux bellowing at Castor. "Step *away* from that chariot, bro!")

"How much for coffee without a backstory?"

De Bres's relationship with her sister only deepens with time, as they endure complications from a shared disability and both come out later in life. They also retain their effortless capacity to collaborate. We "executed our missions jointly, with almost no friction," she writes. "It was like having an extra jetpack strapped to your will."

One wishes, occasionally, that de Bres had a navigation device along with the jet pack. She is a vivacious, self-aware, *busy* writer, tap-dancing to hold our attention, following every moment of philosophy with a joke (in one case, a playful exegesis of the Drake verse "If you had a twin I would still choose you"). She also packs our itinerary too ambitiously; we sometimes find ourselves in thickets of debates miles from our putative subject. For all that, she stitches the project together with brio, a sense of stupefied luck at having a twin, and an insistence that anyone can reap similar benefits by acknowledging our interdependence, relaxing the need to believe in our singularity. "The traditional Western picture is surely right about something: intimate relationships can result in domination, even annihilation," she writes. "But our culture tends to take that concern to extremes. Why think that autonomy and sociality are always opposed, that mutual enmeshment must ever reduce the self rather than expand it? Maybe if we were less defensive about our boundaries, less inclined to fear those who challenge our sense of who we are, we'd be less likely to marginalize and stigmatize those we see as different from us."

It's an unimpeachable aim. Who would be so churlish as to find fault? I don't, quite, but, flickering along the edges of de Bres's enthusiasm, something flashes, a glimpse of another story—something shyer, lonelier, unformed, motivated more by puzzlement than by prescription. "A photograph is a secret about a secret," Diane Arbus once said. "The more it tells you, the less you know." A book can be the same.

I was likely a twin once, a fact I learned only recently, when I underwent routine testing during a pregnancy. Genetically distinct DNA was detected and explained to me as being the possible

remnant of a prenatal twin, a boy, who did not survive, and whose tissue I had absorbed into my own. It has been estimated that some fifteen per cent of us were once a twin. (One theory holds that all left-handed singletons are the surviving members of a vanished twin pair.) We can add this figure to the rise in actual twin births in industrialized countries: in the three decades after 1980, the incidence of twins in the U.S. roughly doubled, reflecting the use of assisted reproduction and women choosing to have children later in life (which increases the odds of multiples). Only in the past few years has the incidence begun to drop; we have evidently reached Peak Twins.

If twins are no longer very rare, statistically speaking, de Bres is intent on stressing their distinctiveness, bordering on an Arbus-like sense of freakishness: "We identical twins, then, are tricky, disruptive, even seditious creatures. We *are* the perfect crime. Most people only run into us occasionally, but the experience of doing so, or the simple idea of twins, can enflame broader anxieties about the fragility of everyone's capacity to stably identify anyone." At such moments, she steps on her own feet, complaining that twins have been scrutinized and exoticized while resolutely doing just that. The temptation, of course, is real. It is an eerie feeling, thumbing through "Twinkind," to realize how its images of twins tend to show them, as Arbus did, shoulder to shoulder, facing the viewer, presenting themselves for our inspection. Only a handful show twins looking at each other. And how different those tender images of mutual regard feel—they lack the charge of the conventional twin pose, underscoring the tension Viney remarks between the actual "mundane" nature of being a twin and the titillated fascination it inspires.

To de Bres, twins amount to a minority group—they are, she writes, othered, and policed. Even as she borrows the terms, she immediately amends: "To be clear, this othering reaches nothing like the oppression faced by racial and gender minorities, disabled people, and women. There's no widespread asymmetrical power structure with singletons at the top and twins at the bottom. Twins aren't at greater risk of violence or abuse than non-twins." Yet, again, she wheels around to claim, "It's not only our bodies, but also our hearts and souls that are under suspicion." As evidence, she quotes Petrushka, from Dostoyevsky's "The Double," who is no one's idea of a sane character witness: "Good people live honestly, good people live without any faking, and they never come double."

As the reasoning writhes around, one fact becomes clear. For de Bres, to be a twin was to be seen. It was, indeed, the social currency she possessed, as she reveals with self-deprecating charm. She recalls how, as flower girls in matching dresses, she and Julia "coolly dominated" a wedding; how, in school, being a twin meant that everyone knew who they were ("though not necessarily who we *each* were"), giving them "a lifetime backstage pass to semicoolness." She and Julia performed their twinhood energetically—auditioning to be twin presenters for a teen-age breakfast program, serving as extras in a television show featuring twin contestants, endlessly performing "twintuition." Even today, she mentions "my twin sister" on her Web site. These details exemplify so many of the themes of the book, including the more elastic form of personhood that twins can share. But, at the margins of these cheerful stories of twindom, de Bres allows us glimpses into open, unresolved questions that she has about herself—her discomfort with sex and the body when she was younger, her appetite for solitude, her tendency to push people away. All are troubles massing at the borders of the single self. As a "we," as a multiple, de Bres is all strength, but, despite her thesis, this twin's capacity for closeness, trust, and collaboration does not prove so easily transferrable to others.

Could it be otherwise for a philosopher-twin? Her accident of birth sent so many questions spinning into the air. Twins remain a potent and beguiling symbol; even now, they have the power to unsettle and surprise. Not even twins are immune. In high school, de Bres and Julia once found themselves in adjacent bathroom stalls without knowing it. They threw open the doors at the same time. Confronted in the mirror by two identical fifteen-year-olds in identical school uniforms, they screamed. ♦

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THE ART WORLD

TONE CONTROL

The sane genius of Emily Mason.

BY JACKSON ARN

In works such as "Pleasure Garden" (1970), Mason made color seem like a story.

"Why isn't she more famous?" The question has bugged me since I first saw the work of Emily Mason, one of the most ravishing post-New York School abstract painters, and my nominee for the most underrated. Not that these things are ever very fair; it's just bizarre that an artist who knew everyone, and whose family everyone knew, ended up so close to unknown. Her distant ancestor John Trumbull painted a portrait of Alexander Hamilton that should look familiar to anyone who's handled a ten-dollar bill, and her mother, the abstract painter Alice Trumbull Mason, hung out with Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler. Many artists have deserved glory, but few of them had Elaine de Kooning for a babysitter. Where's nepotism when you need it?

The simplest explanation is that Mason, who died in 2019, at the age of eighty-seven, was born a generation too late for stardom. By the time she'd come into her own—the early Reagan years, I would say—abstract painting's stock was sagging. To make matters worse, she shows every sign of having been the most embarrassing thing an American painter can be: sane. When deciding who belongs in the pantheon, we like a wild life at least as much as good art, and on this count, alas, Mason failed to deliver—not a single affair with Clement Greenberg or drunken piss at a party. "One of the least angry people I've ever known," the critic David Ebony said, "and least bitter about things that had gone wrong for her in the art world." I'm not trying to be rude, but she and the artist Wolf Kahn, her husband of sixty-plus years, appear to have had a *happy*, *stable* marriage. The juiciest gossip I could find: at first, Mason's mother was surprised that she'd chosen to cohabit with a figurative painter.

In her art, as in her life, clearheadedness was the rule. At "The Thunder Hurried Slow," the second Mason exhibition at Miles McEnery since her death, the oil paintings astonish but never quite swoon with the effort; their breathing is more level. Most are medium-sized and seem not only painted but built, with lots of sturdy squarish shapes inlaid in the frame. Any seventh grader can tell you that a diagonal line conveys movement, but in "Pleasure Garden" (1970) the snug carpentry of two central slashes, one yellow and one red, keeps things static and holds the painting steady—if you shook it hard, nothing would fall out. (Even the blue splatter in the upper right seems fastened securely in place.) Depending on your predilections, the title might sound like a misnomer, but there's a lot of pleasure to be had in crisply balanced moderation, just not the kind that tends to turn living artists into legends. Mason was named for a great American poet, and she named many of her paintings for this poet's phrases, so here's the inescapable analogy: if Pollock was the rollicking Walt Whitman of American abstract art, she was its Emily Dickinson.

With Mason, you come and stay for the colors. She prepared them in cat-food tins, stirring and diluting until they were ready to be poured over the canvas and shaped with a brush or, sometimes, a T-shirt or a finger. At their best, they feel both surprising and inevitable; at their worst, they are merely very, very nice to look at. The earliest work in "The Thunder Hurried Slow" was completed in 1968, the latest in 1979, and there is

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something more than a little seventies about the mold and mustard hues on display. I learned from the exhibition catalogue that Mason visited the cave paintings at Lascaux in her early twenties; this tidbit seems almost too on the nose for an artist who made paint look old and vibrant at once.

It's a rare art show that evokes both stagflation and the prehistoric, but Mason's work inspires this kind of free-associating. You can't stare at her colors without feeling a twitch of recognition—clocking their turquoise and terra-cotta, I felt more like a native Southwesterner than I had in a while—and you can't keep staring without those initial impressions slipping away. I sometimes get the idea that, for Mason, color was a form of storytelling: a pink feels like a plot twist, an orange like a blunt ending. I enjoy her paintings most when she makes an unlikely pair of colors scrape against each other and then smooths things over with a third. In "Greener Lean" (1978), the odd couple are a thick, too sugary green and a sickly yellow, and the deus ex machina is a drizzle of red in the lower right, which gives the yellow a little life and the green a little nuance. And I'm not sure I can say why the royal purple poking out of the sides of "A Paper of Pins" (1974) hits me so hard. It gives me the same quiet shock as the legs poking out of the sea in the Northern Renaissance masterwork "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus": the sense that the big, operatic things in life will always be happening somewhere else, and that this is maybe for the best.

When Mason's paintings come up short, it's usually because they are trying too hard to be uncontrolled and can't shake their nature. Sanity goes slumming but tricks nobody. "Defiant of a Road" (1972) has too much going on and not enough—the colors talk over one another as they wait for a resolution that never arrives. "Quiet Fog" (1976) does have something like a resolution; I just don't buy it. Yellow and red and blue melt into the same shimmery gray, so that nothing specific to the drama between one color and its co-stars gets worked out—if this were the ending of a movie, it would be "It was all a dream!" The painting may be the most illuminating one in the exhibition, though, clarifying what succeeds in a Mason by demonstrating what doesn't. It trails off suggestively, and Mason's style works best when it says what it's trying to say without a stutter.

This may sound like an insult, and in fact many of the finest Mason paintings are very close to the third-rate ones. (Sanity has a tiny margin of error.) Her technique is always in danger of coming across as too pat, but that's part of what makes it so thrilling when it pays off. Working your way from the left to the right side of the small, square "Like Some Old Fashioned Miracle" (1972-74), you first find bright yellow and blue cheek to cheek with hunter green, simple as two plus three equals five. In the center, everything goes wonky. The blue ripens, the shade of green switches from hunter to rusty penny, and the yellow disappears altogether, only to emerge on the other side bearing a little penny rust itself. The shapes are solid-looking for the most part but a little fuzzy around the edges, as though eroded by the elements. (Again, I detect the influence of that trip to Lascaux.) As usual, the painting's title comes from Dickinson, but I'm reminded more strongly of the Song-dynasty poet Wei T'ai, who accidentally summed up Mason's whole raison d'être when he said that poetry "should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling."

The wonder of this painting is that, by not trying to overwhelm, Mason overwhelms. Time, and the way it chews at the grand and the modest with the same appetite, is her subject. Even as she sets out to deal with it frankly, she can't help but transmit strong feeling; for me, it's something like the melancholy jolt of rummaging through the closet and finding an old, yellowing diary. Mason was not an especially innovative artist. She pioneered no major aesthetic school, and, although she taught painting at Hunter College for more than thirty years, has no obvious imitators on the scene today. She's just the person who made "Like Some Old Fashioned Miracle," and that should be—and should have been—more than enough. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

NOT LONG FOR THIS WORLD

"Tótem" and "I.S.S."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The heroine of "Tótem," a new film from the Mexican director Lila Avilés, is a girl by the name of Solecito (Naíma Sentíes), or Sol for short. We are never told her age: seven or eight, perhaps, though she's one of those naturally grave children who seem a little older and wiser than they ought—or would choose—to be. In Sol's case, the wisdom is hard-won. She has moments of foolery and giggling, but much of the time she keeps quiet, or abstracts herself from the proceedings. The final third of the movie depicts a birthday party for her father, Tonatiuh, or Tona (Mateo García Elizondo), and where do we find Sol, as the revels get under way? Roosting on high, at rooftop level, gazing down at the fun. Somebody sends a camera up on a drone, for a laugh, to capture Sol on her perch. "Stop filming me!" she exclaims. "Leave me alone!"

In Lila Avilés's film, a girl attends a birthday party for her terminally ill father.

The tenor of "Tótem," in which the solemn is wreathed with the festive, is established in an early scene. Sol is being driven to the party by her mother, Lucía (Iazua Larios), and they play a game in the car: hold your breath and make a wish. Sol, without prompting, admits, "I wished for Daddy not to die." Tona has cancer, and, when we meet him, we believe as much; he is little more than a skeleton with a smile, and this birthday will almost certainly be his last. Hence the family that assembles around him, later swelled by friends. Tona's siblings include Alejandra (Marisol Gasé), who is first seen dyeing her hair, and Nuri (Montserrat Marañón), who is baking a cake and icing it to resemble van Gogh's "Starry Night"—an excuse, mainly, to stay in the kitchen and get drunk. Also present is Nuri's daughter, Esther (Saori Gurza), who is younger than Sol and more clinging; she sits atop the fridge, holding a cat, and hangs on to her mother's legs when Nuri tries to leave the room. Tona's elderly father, Roberto (Alberto Amador), is there, too, with a face of thunder, obsessively clipping a bonsai tree. Has he always, we wonder, been so impossible to please?

Avilés's previous movie, "The Chambermaid" (2019), was set in a hotel in Mexico City, and shot with astringent care. The most genial of its stars, Teresita Sánchez, returns here in the role of Cruz, Tona's nurse, who is the soul of sensible patience; notice how calmly she mentions, as the party winds down, that she hasn't been paid in two weeks. "Tótem" is more relaxed than "The Chambermaid," often crowded but rarely confounding, and Avilés homes in on solitary figures amid the throng. The camera watches, weaves, and waits—not so much sticking its nose in, like a meddlesome guest, as making sure that people are attended to, if only with a glance. Should their actions be of no great consequence, better still; look at Roberto, straining to pull on a sock, or Sol taking a furtive slug of wine and pulling a face. At one point, the adults do that stupid thing of parcelling their speech into bits ("che-mo-the-ra-py"), in the hope that the kids won't understand what's going on. Yeah, right. Sol listens in, and instantly breaks the code. Parents in the audience will recognize the dilemma: when you lock children out from what you fear they cannot bear to learn, are you protecting them or storing up harm in their hearts? And don't they always turn the key and find out anyway?

The surprising thing about this film, given its potential for devastation, is how funny it can be. As you'd imagine, the humor wells up from anxiety; that's why Alejandra, the most credulous of the grownups, hires a psychic to walk around the house and cleanse it of bad energy. This involves belching, buckets of water, and the ceremonial torching of a bread roll—summarized by Roberto as "satanic bullshit"—and costs two and a half thousand pesos. ("I also sell Tupperware," the psychic adds.) And all on the day of a party! What Tona's loved ones are doing, of course, as recorded by "Tótem" in a welter of detail, is fending off the prospect of his death by cluttering his environment with life. For good measure, some of that life is animal. The cat shatters the fourth wall, as cats will; Sol receives a goldfish named Nugget, which doesn't bode well; a shy scorpion scurries into a crack; and the end credits are punctuated by drawings of various creatures. The only poor performance is that of a stick insect, which keeps waving its arms about. Or its legs. It should have paid attention in drama class.

ILLUSTRATION BY DIEGO MALLO

There isn't much music in "Tótem," and what there is gets piled up in the closing stretch. In an extraordinary act of ventriloquism, we hear a rendition of "Spargi d'amaro pianto" ("Sprinkle with bitter crying"), from the mad scene in Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor." Raise your hand if you were expecting *that*. Who the ventriloquist is, and how the aria slots into the plot, I leave for you to discover. Suffice to say that somehow, for reasons that I'm still mulling over, the madness touches the quick of this sad and lively tale. All that remains is for the film's composer, Thomas Becka, to herald the climax with a surge of sounds at once jungly and industrial, and for Sol—a hauntingly thoughtful child rather than a dreamy one, with way too much on her mind—to stare straight at us, by the light of the candles on her father's cake. She doesn't want them, or anything else, to be snuffed out.

If you seek another awkward social gathering, on a slightly higher plane, try Gabriela Cowperthwaite's latest movie, "I.S.S." The title refers not to the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which ceased to exist under that name in 1921 and could probably use a revival, but to the International Space Station—the clunky modular construction, orbiting our planet at a distance of some two hundred and fifty miles, that has become a byword for harmony and peace. I mean, where else can you go to the toilet in a module called Tranquility?

Ten years ago, Cowperthwaite made a serious splash with "Blackfish," a documentary about the treatment of killer whales in captivity. When I first heard about this new project, I hoped, foolishly but fervently, that she might have hitched a ride on a shuttle and smuggled her cameras onto the actual I.S.S. Where better to study the feral behavior of trapped humans? No such luck. Instead, this is a feature film, with actors portraying a resident crew of six: three Russians plus—or, increasingly, versus—three Americans. Just arrived on board is Dr. Kira Foster, played by Ariana DeBose. Moviegoers will recognize DeBose from "West Side Story" (2021), in which, as Anita, she sported a bright-yellow halter-neck dress as opposed to a spacesuit. She also remarked to Tony, after he met and made nice to Maria, "Do you want to start World War Three?"

Fancy that. Here *is* World War Three, in all its finery. Gazing out of the Cupola, the primary viewing platform on the I.S.S., Kira notices a sudden fiery bloom of what she takes to be a volcano, down on the surface of the Earth. Then another bloom. And another. Holy smoke! It's the Jets and the Sharks all over again, this time with nuclear warheads. Before long, most of the world is lit up by conflagrations, and the film is graced with an unintended and somewhat unfortunate irony: from afar, the apocalypse is quite a pretty sight.

At this juncture, you might think the astronauts should thank their lucky stars. How about clubbing together to enjoy their heavenly haven, away from the inferno? Not a chance. The senior American on the station, Barrett (Chris Messina), receives a secret message, presumably from a government bunker, with an instruction: "Your new objective is to take control of the I.S.S." Meanwhile, his Russian counterpart, Pulov (Costa Ronin), gets much the same order from his terrestrial superiors. The rest of the movie finds the two teams tussling for supremacy, with only Kira and her opposite number, Vetrov (Masha Mashkova), known as Nika, risking a tenuous pact. To be on the I.S.S., according to Nika, can be "a spiritual awakening." No longer. Now it's a straight fight.

As a thriller, regrettably, "I.S.S." fails to fulfill its mission. Any air of plausibility soon leaks out of the plot, and the whole thing drifts into silliness, tricked out with familiar tropes. (As any sci-fi fan can tell you, space walks never go as planned, and we even get a closeup of someone deciding whether or not to snip a crucial wire.) Now and then, however, there are fragments of authentic strangeness and wit; with a documentarian's hungry eye, Cowperthwaite feeds on the challenges of zero gravity. If you're dozing off, for instance, and you don't fancy being cocooned like a pupa in a vertical sleeping bag, stuck to a wall, your other option is to float in a fetal curl, as if awaiting birth. In the matter of death, look and learn as one astronaut stabs another in the neck with a screwdriver; blood, rather than spurting or flowing, emerges in little red bubbles—life just fizzing away. Most teasing of all is a conversation about sex in space. "I can't say that physics is exactly on your side up here," Kira says. Moon shots and money shots: if any film cries out for a sequel, it's this one. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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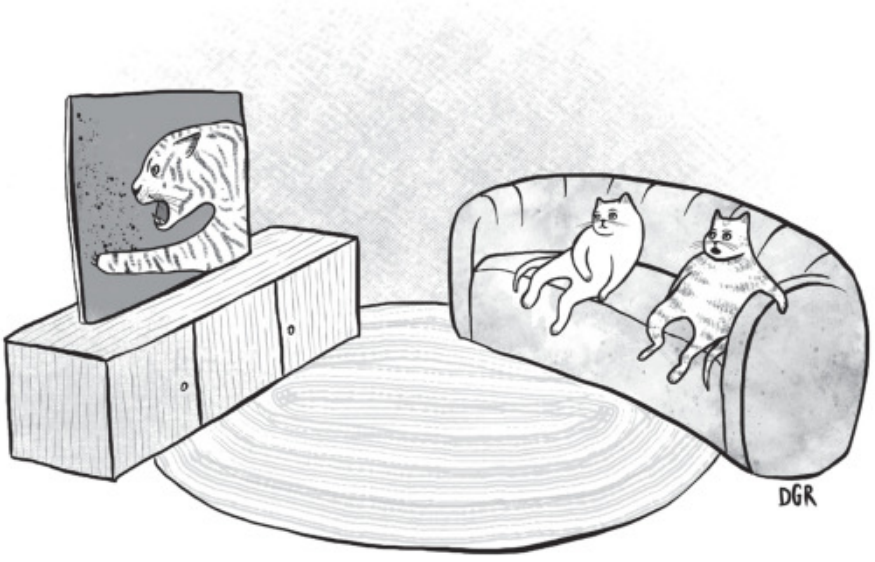
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Dahlia Gallin Ramirez, must be received by Sunday, January 28th. The finalists in the January 15th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 12th & 19th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

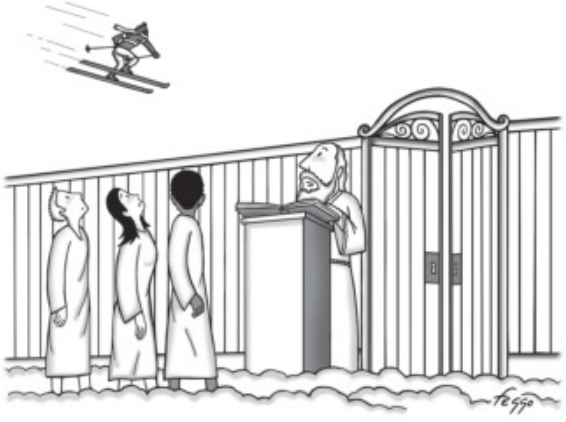
THE FINALISTS

“Gentlemen, I don't think drinking is going to solve your differences.”
Christopher Schadt, Pasadena, Calif.

“Just one round, or two out of three?”
Erin Viehl, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

“Pay up front. I know how this ends.”
Sean Kirk, Bellingham, Wash.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“John 3:16 still the time to beat!”
Douglas Finkelstein, Redondo Beach, Calif.

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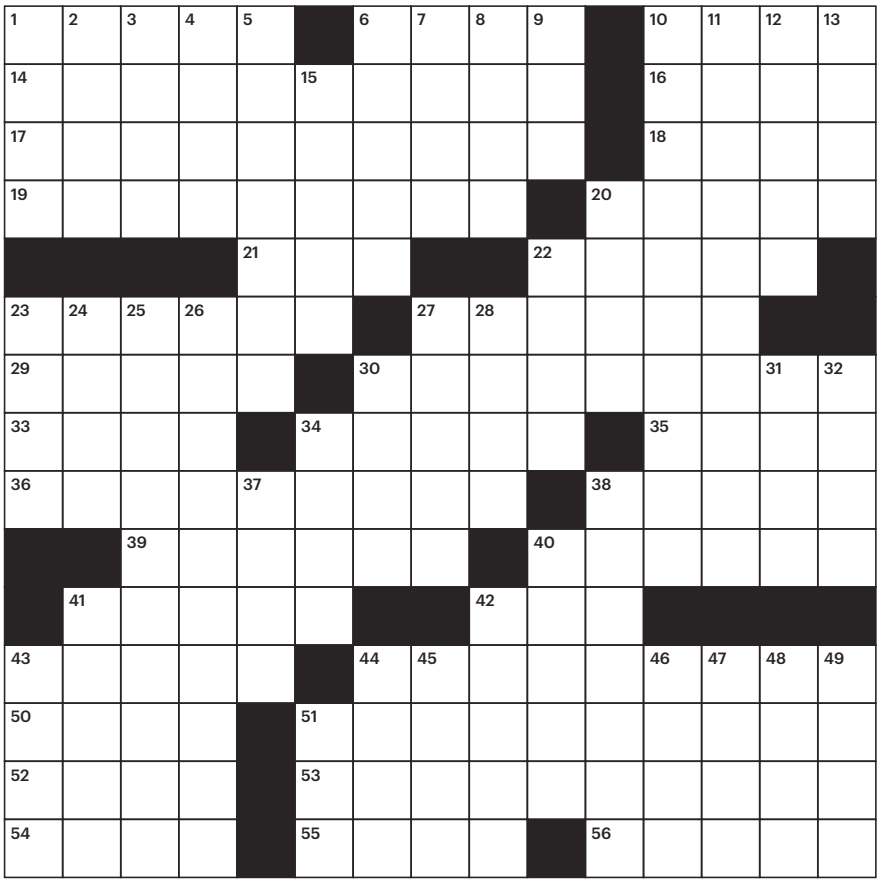
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 Does some roadwork
6 Orgs. that might plan school walkathons
10 Squabble
14 Orchard with fruit prized for its oil
16 Grocery chain with a stylized "A" logo
17 Words followed by a number on a highway sign
18 "We ___ a Little Christmas" (holiday standard originally from "Mame")
19 Sriracha, Tabasco, and Cholula
20 Birthplace of Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace
21 Daisy Ridley's "Star Wars" role
22 Clean a whiteboard, say
23 Fearful
27 ___ Tussauds
29 Birds on Canadian one-dollar coins
30 Woos with song
33 Largest branch of the U.S. military
34 "You're Still the One" singer Shania
35 Travelled by horse or hoverboard
36 Person working behind the scenes on Broadway
38 Watch a whole season in one sitting, say
39 Feature of some adults-only beaches
40 Requiring adult supervision for moviegoers under seventeen
41 Hunts for dinner, with "on"
42 "___ is me" (Shakespearean lament)
43 Middle name of the "Green Eggs and Ham" author Theodor Geisel
44 Situations that aren't black and white
50 Soul singer Redding
51 Cheesy Mexican dish
52 Hormonal ___ (skin condition)
53 Baseball feat that always ends an inning
54 Supreme leader?
55 Puts one's hat in the ring
56 University bigwigs

DOWN

1 Ritzy
2 Brand that makes Come & Get It! dog food
3 ___ Than Nguyen (Pulitzer-winning author of "The Sympathizer")
4 December 24th and 31st, for two
5 Last name of the comedic siblings Amy and David
6 What "$$$$" means in a restaurant review
7 "Give it ___ straight"
8 Hertz alternative
9 Where a director shouts "Action!"
10 Ship that sailed alongside the Niña and Pinta
11 "I'm begging you, stay out of it!"
12 Mononymous singer of "Skyfall"
13 Uncluttered
15 Adhered together, as model-airplane pieces
20 Country that shares the first three letters of its name with a neighboring country
22 Paradise in the Book of Genesis
23 "Oh, dear," to King Lear
24 Word before Lauderdale or Ticonderoga
25 The Colosseum, the Circus Maximus, and the like
26 "Somebody want to take a stab at it?"
27 Bugs ___ (aptly named bully in the "Encyclopedia Brown" series)
28 Dry as a desert
30 Hit, as a mosquito
31 Part of a jigsaw puzzle frequently assembled first
32 Sesame or chia product
34 "___ is not a drill!"
37 Ice-cream brand also sold as Dreyer's
38 Like Wiener schnitzel, chicken katsu, and Scotch eggs
40 "Red, White & ___ Blue" (2023 rom-com about the U.S. President's son and a British prince)
41 Retailer that sells pythons and parakeets
42 Venomous flying insects
43 Emulate an eagle
44 Esteemed expert
45 Bridle strap
46 Ready to be picked
47 Jazz songstress Fitzgerald
48 Alda in the Television Academy Hall of Fame
49 Simon ___ (children's party game)
51 Football-game div.

Solution to the previous puzzle:

M	O	L	T	S	■	W	I	F	I	■	P	O	S	H
I	M	A	H	U	G	E	F	A	N	■	A	B	L	Y
C	A	S	A	B	L	A	N	C	A	■	S	L	I	P
A	N	T	I	H	E	R	O	E	S	■	S	I	D	E
■	■	■	■	E	A	S	T	■	T	A	T	T	E	R
T	H	E	B	A	N	■	■	D	A	S	H	E	R	■
O	I	L	E	D	■	■	G	A	T	H	E	R	U	P
O	G	L	E	■	F	L	A	M	E	■	H	A	L	E
T	H	I	R	T	I	E	S	■	■	L	A	T	E	R
■	C	O	B	U	R	N	■	■	D	E	T	E	S	T
R	O	T	A	T	E	■	D	A	R	N	■	■	■	■
I	M	P	S	■	O	N	E	M	A	N	S	H	O	W
L	E	A	H	■	P	I	N	A	C	O	L	A	D	A
E	D	G	E	■	A	N	T	S	O	N	A	L	O	G
D	Y	E	S	■	L	E	S	S	■	S	M	O	R	E

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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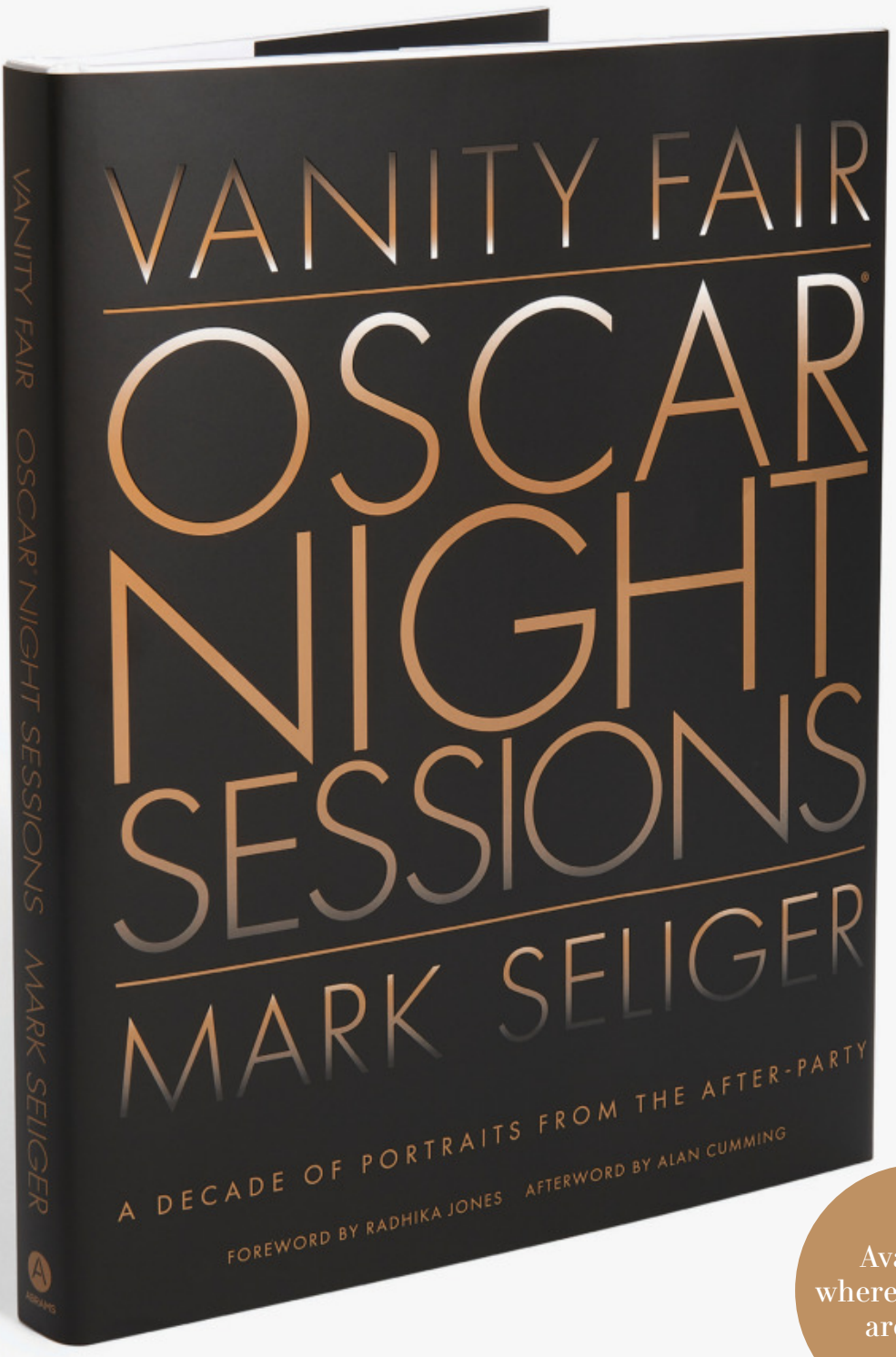

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